

The Zollner Piston Story



by Rodger Nelson

THE ZOLLNER PISTONS

Whether the name 'Zollner Pistons' conjures up softball or basketball, it always means champions.

Fred Zollner's teams put Fort Wayne, Indiana, on the sports pages of the nation. They not only won games, they were leaders in softball for more than a decade and innovators in basketball. The Pistons' historic 19-18 win over the Lakers in 1950 led directly to the 24 second clock. They also pointed the way to an expanded foul line. They were the first sports team to travel to and from their games by air.

The Zollner Pistons' story takes us back to the early days of pro basketball and the golden era of fastball. It all happened because of one generous and visionary man, Fred Zollner.

Here we have the history of those teams, written by Rodger Nelson, who watched the Pistons play, and with contributions by the players themselves.

The tale of Fred Zollner and his teams is sports at its best: exciting, innovative, and above all, fun.

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THE

ZOLLNER PISTON

STORY

BY RODGER NELSON

EDITED BY RYAN TAYLOR

Allen County Public Library Foundation
Fort Wayne, Indiana

1995

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Dedication

This book is humbly but proudly dedicated to my four very best friends, Jenny, Reid, Jon and Anne. May their tribes increase.

And to two other special best friends, Chris and Max.

And to the treasured memories of my beloved Mary Alice, and Phil Harris.

Also to all the endearing and enduring friendships which have been created through our wonderful world of sports.

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Several former members of the Knot Hole Gang contributed reminiscences: Don Graham, Mary Ellen Johnston, Virginia Simone Wyman, Jerry Snyder, Chuck Suder, Jerry Thompson, Don Weber.

A great many people assisted, in large and small ways. If we have missed mentioning any name, we are sorry, but we are still grateful to you. Dating the team photographs was somewhat difficult; if we made an error, we are sorry.

Fort Wayne
August 1995

R.N.

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Zollner Machine Works and the Teams

The Zollner story started out as a family affair and wound up internationally celebrated.

The story begins with Theodore Zollner, a pioneer in industrial leadership. His son, Fred, was one of the founders of major league professional basketball as we know it today. Zollner Machine Works' sponsorships delivered world championships in softball (fastball) and professional basketball, and gave the Summit City its only bona fide major league experience.

The Golden Era of Zollner Piston sports in Fort Wayne started in 1941 when both the company-sponsored softball and basketball teams stepped away from the local competition to play in premier amateur softball and major league professional basketball action.

It lasted until 1957 when Fred Zollner moved his National Basketball Association franchise to Detroit where they are still playing as the Detroit Pistons. The Pistons that made Fort Wayne famous have now made Detroit famous.

The Zollner name made a meteoric rise in both industry and sports once it picked up its roots in Duluth, Minnesota, and moved to Fort Wayne in 1931. The Zollner zeal for excellence in tooling and machination spilled over into the teams the family sponsored or the franchises they owned.

Ted Zollner, at age seventeen, started out as a \$20-a-month apprentice machinist for Twin City Iron Works in Minneapolis. He became one of the industrial giants of the country. Along the way, the company that carried his name spawned two great athletic legacies: a softball team that jumped from the sandlots to the top of its class, and a storybook basketball team that went from the YMCA to the National Basketball Association. The softball team, best ever to play the sport, was the first three-time winner of the world's championship and never finished less than first in any league in which it played. They won 87% of all the games they played. Nine Zollner Piston players are enshrined in the Softball Hall of Fame.

The basketball team jumped from a local industrial league into the National Basketball League and became the first three-time winner of the world's professional championship when it was decided by a sixteen team tournament in Chicago. The team also became one of the original franchises of the National Basketball Association.

Besides the three world championships in softball and basketball, some important Zollner milestones have been the building, in 1947, of

Zollner Stadium on North Anthony Boulevard in Fort Wayne (now the home of the Concordia High School Cadets), occupancy as the major tenant of the Allen County Memorial Coliseum when it opened in 1952, the hosting of the NBA All-Star Game in 1953, and varieties of entertainment including ice shows, concerts, personal appearances, boxing, and wrestling.

Zollner Machine Works was founded in Duluth, Minnesota in 1912. It was a one man show — Theodore Zollner and one tooling machine. Zollner invented an automatic machine for weighing difficult bulk items such as sugars and grains for wholesale merchants. At the age of thirty-four, he resigned as superintendent of Duluth's Marine, Iron and Shipbuilding Company and set up shop to manufacture and sell the machine.

Theodore's family moved to Minneapolis shortly after his birth in 1877 at Waupun, Wisconsin. His father built and designed flour and grain storage mills. Theodore sensed the romance of mechanization as applied to making rough metal into a desired product by use of machines.

In those days, the approach to trade was through apprenticeships and they were not easy to come by. The term was for four years and usually required a \$500 bond to insure completion of the course. Theodore applied to the Twin Cities Iron Works for his training as a machinist. There were no openings but Theodore persisted. The hiring man finally concluded, "Around here we like to be sure a man knows what he wants. I guess you know what you want. You'll be a machinist." The apprenticeship began at twenty dollars a month for one year with small increases each succeeding year. Each problem he encountered in metals processes and machines seemed only to center his interest in machines. He stayed for an extra year at Twin Cities then struck out for other jobs in the mining and ship building industries in northern Minnesota. He wound up in Duluth and invented the automatic weighing machine.

Business was good, and he had soon saturated the local market. His company was too small to go national. In 1914 he was joined at Zollner Manufacturing Company (as it was known then) by an apprentice, his own son, Fred. Fred went to school half days and spent the remainder of the days and his summer vacations working at the plant.

The name of the company was officially changed to Zollner Machine Works in 1918. Theodore Zollner saw the automobile as a tremendous potential on the industrial horizon. He began to rebuild automotive engines along with manufacturing precision parts for the pneumatic tools used in Minnesota's great iron mines.



Theodore 'Ted' Zollner, the founder of the corporation that bears his name.

From 1917 to 1921, Fred Zollner worked side by side with his father, operating the machine adjacent to his dad's. From 1918, after finishing secondary school, Fred worked full time at Zollner Machine Works.

In 1919, Theodore decided that Fred should have more formal education and the younger Zollner attended night school from 1919 to 1927, working days and going to classes at night.

By 1924, both phases of Zollner Machine Works products were highly touted, noteworthy particularly for parts for mining tools. A Zollner rebuilt engine was considered equal to a new engine while the Zollner-designed, Zollner-built pistons were considered superior to the original equipment.

Fred received his engineering degree from the University of Minnesota in 1927. There were some personal sacrifices along the way — fourteen-hour work days and, at one juncture, sale of Theodore's forty acre farm to keep the business alive.

By 1928, Zollner's was recognized for its high quality pneumatic tool parts and its pistons. It was decision time as to which endeavor to pursue. Ted Zollner decided to concentrate on the heavy duty aluminum piston. The pneumatic tool parts division was sold.

The pistons were so successful that leading engine manufacturers were demanding Zollner pistons for their engines, the demands continuing to grow despite the national depression which began in 1929. Duluth became economically unfeasible for the growth of the company. Zollner Machine Works had to find a new location, more accessible to its customers and suppliers. After a diligent search, Fort Wayne was found to answer all the criteria.

Fort Wayne was a clean, pleasant city in which to live with easy access to the entire Midwest, a hub with spokes to Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Columbus, Indianapolis, and a very respectable manufacturing city in its own right.

So, right in the middle of the snowballing Great Depression, Zollner Machine Works moved to Fort Wayne from Duluth. Theodore was president, Fred vice-president, with daughter Janet the secretary-treasurer. The entire work force numbered twelve. The site was on Bueter Road (now Coliseum Boulevard South). The single story brick building was 50 X 100 feet on a 100 X 300 tract of land, dwarfed by its giant neighbor, International Harvester, to the south.



Janet Zollner Fisher

There was room for expansion, which was necessary as the piston business flourished with the nation tooling up for World War II. Ted Zollner had longstanding plans to retire when he reached the age of sixty-five but fate intervened and produced two of the greatest achievements in his life. Normal retirement would have been in 1942. World War II was at hand and those engines of war needed Zollner pistons. So in 1942 another building was added. Plant size and production capacity more than doubled and the new structure (now the center building) became the Aircraft Building, which opened in 1943.

Wright Aeronautical production was activated. Zollner pistons became vital parts of Wright's American bomber and fighter planes. Tooling and organizing the aeronautical line was considered the crowning achievement of Ted Zollner's life, coming after he reached the age of sixty-five.

There was pride when Zollner Machine Works not only met deadlines but beat them. Where the allowable number of rejects was five percent, Zollner shrank its rejection percentage to one fourth of one percent.

The combination of speed, efficiency, precision, and perfection won the company the coveted Army-Navy "E" citation in July, 1943, for war effort. Theodore Zollner considered this award the proudest moment of his life. In the relatively short space of twelve years, Zollner Machine Works had risen to become an industrial giant.

In actuality it was a "Ted and Fred Show." With its small work force, all activities could not help but be on a respectful first-name basis. And, of course, Janet (later Mrs. Emerson Fisher) was more often called by her first name than as 'Miss Zollner'. She still lives in Fort Wayne.

The first-name familiarity laid the cornerstone for good working conditions in a friendly atmosphere. Ted and Fred made a fine management team. Fred's informal style was characterized by his habit of signing his staff memos simply "Fred." Ted was more at home in the plant than behind the desk.

Both became recognized throughout the industry for their engineering genius. Fred ran the front office; Ted took care of the plant. Janet watched the books. Perception and perfection became the Zollner trademark.

The Zollner family and Zollner Machine Works were good citizens. They paid their proper dues to worthy community or civic projects. Yet, the family was socially private, actually shunning the spotlight.

Both father and son were avid sports enthusiasts, perhaps Ted more as a participant and Fred a spectator-fan. Ted was a rugged outdoorsman, a crack shot and a good fisherman. He liked bowling and indulged himself in one of his few rare luxuries by building his own two-lane bowling alley on Fairfield Avenue.

Sports was a high priority with the Zollners in furthering employee relations at the piston plant. Sponsorship of athletic teams in bowling, softball and basketball proved good for morale. Little did anyone realize that this sponsorship in two sports would lead to distinction among the founding fathers of the National Basketball Association and the best softball team ever put together.

While Fred was the catalyst for the sports programs, Theodore was one hundred percent behind every activity, wanting to play to win every time. The willingness to work, the ability to think and the courage to take a chance had brought huge rewards to Zollner Machine Works through Ted's and Fred's efforts, and the same would prevail in the wide world of sports.

From the twelve-man force that moved to Fort Wayne in 1931, the firm eventually became the supplier of seventy percent of the world's heavy duty aluminum alloy pistons for internal combustion engines. Just as Zollner's had chosen Fort Wayne as a pleasant city in which to live, a large piece of Fort Wayne's work force found Zollner Machine Works a pleasant place to work. Former personnel director and athletic boss Carl Bennett said that during World War II and afterwards, employment reached 1800.

Theodore Zollner retired after World War II. He died of a heart attack in 1952, aged 74.

Zollner Machine Works became the Zollner Corporation in 1956. It remained privately owned by the Zollner family until 1990.

Fred Zollner

Enigmatic Fred Zollner was simplistic yet complicated, an engineering genius, disciplined, determined and decisive, extremely competitive, generous, fair, compassionate, publicly shy and craftily sly without deception, a very private person. Both of his marriages were childless, yet he was known and respected for his love of children. He enjoyed a rapport with them that few adults can claim.



Fred Zollner, son of the founder and the person wholly responsible for the outstanding Zollner Piston sports program.

Ray Scherer, a native of Fort Wayne who gained fame as an NBC White House correspondent, said of Fred, "As for his vicarious father syndrome, what I remember is my brother, Jim coming home and saying that this nice man with the big house on Forest Park Boulevard had picked him up and three or four other lads in the Zollner Buick, gave them a speedy ride out the St. Joe Road and then wound up buying them ice cream." This would have been in the 1930s.

One of Zollner's greatest legacies may be with youngsters. Many have speculated that it was the frustration of having no children of his own that led to productive fun and education with kids. In the Lakeside Park area, he would round up grade school youth and get them into softball action. He even leveled off a vacant lot at Kenwood and Crescent for a ball diamond and erected a backstop so that kids could play the game.

Bernie Kampschmidt recalled the Pistons lying in the grass at the Peoria Caterpillars' home field. Ball players in uniform always draw kids, and there was soon a crowd. Fred came out to join them, dressed in a suit, but before long he was wrestling with the boys in the grass. Bernie said, "He didn't care about the stains on his suit."

When Zollner Stadium was built to house his world champion softballers, the Zollner organization started the Knot Hole Gang, a program devoted to the youth of Fort Wayne. Many Fort Wayne natives recall happy Knot Hole Gang times provided by Fred Zollner.

Zollner was seen in many different lights by his peers. "Fred Zollner," Detroit columnist Myron Cope once wrote, "is short and stocky, a dapper man sporting peak lapels, a silk shirt, a constant tan and an unruly coiffure that suggests he is about to mount a podium and conduct Beethoven's Ninth.

"He is the sort who would not harm a fly. Rather than swat one, he would catch cold holding the door open until the fly got ready to leave."

Carl Biemiller, executive editor of *Holiday Magazine*, came to Fort Wayne to do a story entitled "Hoop Happy Town." He presented Fort Wayne as a "town in love with basketball."

Biemiller wrote, "Zollner, at forty-nine, is a soft-voiced curly-headed manufacturer, a friendly man with a taste for expensive striped suits and the engaging knack of making them look as if he'd worn them to bed."¹

Zollner's foray into the national sports scene was merely an extension of company policy. The unwritten idea was a splendid

¹ February 1951, p.76.

employee relations program which, like the piston production, just kept growing.

Fred's parents had front row seats; Fred sat on the bench. He shared the pre-game locker room buzz as a more-than-interested fan, laid back owner and had an arms-length fellowship with his players, perhaps more paternal than fraternal.

Zollner was more active on the softball bench than in basketball, as softball was acknowledged as his original favorite. One of Fred's earliest recollections of his father, and of sports, was when Theodore pushed him through a turnstile at a baseball game.

Hughie Johnston said he preferred not to be the guy sitting next to Fred. "He was like a wild man on that bench," shifting and moving with the excitement of the game. "He wanted to win and he wanted to win by more than one run."

Hughie recalled a game in Michigan. It was a dull game. "We were ahead by five runs or so," Hughie explains, "And the mosquitoes were out." He sat on the bench, bored. Beside him, Fred was as excited as ever. When Hughie asked him why, Fred looked at him as if he were crazy.

Having Fred there did make a difference, in Hughie's view. "The reason we played so well," he says, "was because Fred was on our bench. He had good judgment."

While Theodore enjoyed his role as a regular guy, Fred was more of a loner. Their intense work ethic left little time for frivolity. Ted's outlet was some hunting and fishing. Fred's recreation was watching his plant-sponsored softball teams from the press box.

They both had private social lives. Fred's best friends were his business associates. He did not play golf. He was more at ease with a pinball game in the neighboring suburb of New Haven than spending an off night playing cards with the boys in a country club setting.

In a sense, Ted built the machines and Fred, a brilliant engineer, honed and designed the pistons that rolled off them. Fred spent all his sixty-eight working years with the Zollner Corporation. He excelled enough at inventing and improving piston designs, structurally and metallurgically, that at times he turned down job offers when he could have named his own price.

Leo Luken recalls that Fred helped engineers at General Motors, Caterpillar and other plants by preparing experimental pistons, which they could then try on their new products. It was a way of developing markets, but also showed his own engineering expertise.

Fred was incisive, decisive, and his projects had horizons that were continually expanding. He hired people who had their eyes on the same target and to whom he could delegate authority with confidence. Many times he was so immersed in plant work or product development that he would approve a softball budget or a basketball transaction with an approving nod or a firm handshake. Some personnel situations in the plant were decided in the same quick manner.

If production was slack for a time, he would not enforce quick layoffs, but deferred them with a "let's see if it gets better in a few weeks" attitude. His foresight, perception and judgment were well respected by all his associates.

Zollner's rapid ascendancy to domination in both softball and basketball may be unparalleled in industrial sponsorship history. And with Zollner's high standards of excellence, it almost seemed automatic. Zollner's lieutenant in the formative years of Piston teams was Carl Bennett.

Forty-five years after Theodore Zollner began his apprenticeship, his son Fred hired a sports apprentice of his own. Bennett was first baseman for Fairview Nurseries' team in Fort Wayne's fastest softball league, and in 1938 was named player of the year. Fred Zollner was an avid fan and enjoyed some of the game from the press box. Fred asked Carl to come to work at Zollner Machine Works in 1939.

This began a pattern. It seemed that the best way to get a job with the Zollners was to play well against them. Fred Zollner offered Carl Bennett a chance to work at the Zollner plant and play first base on his entry in the Main Auto Major Softball League.

Carl had been making nineteen cents an hour at Charlie Seyfert's potato chip operation on East Wallace street, so the Zollner offer was too good to turn down. Eventually Carl would be player, business manager, coach, athletic director, personnel director, basketball coach, president of both the National Softball League and the National Basketball League and would serve on the board of governors of the National Basketball Association. He became Fred's front man for the Zollner sports activities.

"Sports, under Fred, was relatively informal but he just wanted to have the best teams and many of our workers were among the best athletes in the city and we were almost automatically winners," Bennett said, "Eventually Fred gave Fort Wayne a national reputation in both business and sports. Everything he did was first class." First class in Zollner's eyes also included first place, and the major leagues.



CARL IS A PAST PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL FASTBALL LEAGUE AND NATIONAL BASKETBALL LEAGUE, AND IS AS FAMILIAR WITH PRO BASKETBALL AS ANYONE CONNECTED WITH THE GAME TODAY!

Carl BENNETT



ATHLETIC DIRECTOR OF THE ZOLLNER PISTONS
MEMBER OF THE BOARD OF GOVERNORS OF THE NATIONAL BASKETBALL ASSOCIATION

!!

— HE WAS A FINE ATHLETE HIMSELF PARTICIPATING IN BASEBALL, BASKETBALL, AND FASTBALL FOR A GOOD MANY YEARS IN AND AROUND FORT WAYNE —

Bob Finney



CARL JOINED THE PISTONS IN 1939 AND HAS BEEN LARGELY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEIR OUTSTANDING SPORTS PROGRAM



Zollner Softball, 1938. Kneeling L to R: Harold Nahrwold, Rollie Kammer, Ray Yarnman, batboy Don Gouneau, Jake Grim, Bill Herr, Bob Symonds. Standing L to R: Walt Lundquist, Kenny Koch, Joe Grimme, Art Hieber, Earl Rickey, Porky Slater, Marv Degitz, Jim Hilgenan, manager Harold Koch.

It happened gradually, but with certainty. After cakewalking through Fort Wayne's major industrial league, and running short of local competition, Fred suggested to Bennett that they expand their horizons and reach out for better foes.

South Bend's Bendix Brakes was one of the Midwest's softball powers along with Detroit's Briggs and several others from the motor city. National power was focused in the industrial Midwest. Nick Carr's Boosters of Covington, Kentucky, had won the world title in 1939, Briggs a year earlier. Toledo and Columbus were strong.

With the go-ahead from Fred, Bennett branched out. As Zollner Machine Works started to flourish, Bennett became personnel director at the plant and business manager for the company-sponsored sports teams.

League basketball was also in its early stages. The first NCAA tournament was played in 1939. Professional basketball was almost semi-pro. The seasons, schedules and league competition were not enough to keep a player busy without finding off-season employment.

Franchises were changing. The depression had flattened many teams; the most noted pro teams were those that toured, such as the New York Celtics, New York Rens, Washington, Boston, Philadelphia Sphas, and Detroit Eagles. The pro championship was decided by a sixteen team tournament in Chicago Stadium, the winner of which would play the college all-stars to start out the following season.

The world's pro tournament was the springboard to Zollner's emerging on the national basketball scene.

Leo Fischer, sports editor of the Chicago *Herald-American*, was the organizer for the pro tournament. He was also president of the tottering National Basketball League. His pro tournament, with the winner hosting the college all-stars in the fall, was more or less the *Herald-American's* answer to the Chicago *Tribune's* entrepreneurial sports editor Arch Ward. Ward had created the major league all-star baseball game and the annual college all-star football game.

In seeking to round out his sixteen-team field, Fischer offered Fort Wayne a place. The best independents in Fort Wayne were the Zollner and International Harvester teams. They played off for the right to go to the pro tournament. Zollner won 37-35.

The win was no fluke, as the Pistons had been unbeaten in both halves of industrial league play. But the fact that they did well enough to compete in the pro tournament whetted Fred Zollner's appetite for expanding basketball horizons.

Fort Wayne had a history in pro basketball with the Fort Wayne Knights of Columbus and the Fort Wayne Hoosiers. The Fort Wayne General Electrics played in the NBL in 1937 but folded after one year. The fact that an industrial league team from Fort Wayne could compete in the world's pro tournament says something about pro basketball in the late 1930s and early 40s.

The Pistons went to the Chicago Amphitheater and drew Lon Darling's Oshkosh All-Stars, one of the vaunted pro teams, as their first opponents. Oshkosh had finished second the previous year in the tournament.

On the Piston squad were Don Beery, Red Oberbrunner, Jim (Wiggles) Hilgeman, George (Red) Gatton, Dale Hamilton, Bob Symonds, Joe Grimme, Jack Keller, Phil Bail, and Johnny Shaffer. They beefed up their YMCA team by adding Hans Dienelt, Jim Glass, and Bob Irons. Bennett went along to handle the business.

Fort Wayne made a credible showing, losing only to the old-time pros from Oshkosh, 47-41. Winners of the championship were the Detroit Eagles, whose roster included Jerry Bush, Ed Sadowski, and Buddy Jeannette, all of whom eventually would wind up in Zollner uniforms. Jeannette had a great pro career and later coached the Baltimore Bullets. He said about Fred Zollner, "Fred took pro basketball out of the nickel and dime business."

After their respectable debut in major competition, Zollner summoned Bennett into his office and said, "Carl, let's get some tougher, better teams to play from now on. See if we can get a better schedule."

Bennett went to Chicago to talk to Fischer, president of the National Basketball League, to arrange more exhibitions for the pro teams to play in Fort Wayne. Fischer had a better idea. "Why don't you join the league, and you'd be playing the best on a regularly scheduled, competitive basis?"

Thus the Fort Wayners became professionals and joined the National Basketball League, the best in pro basketball.

Bennett, with his mandate from Fred, became a scheduler, recruiter, business manager, and part-time coach. He still loved to play first base for the championship softball team that Fred was building. In Zollner's quest to be the best, Bennett did such a good job of loading up the team that he lost his playing job.

In 1943 the Pistons brought in Hughie Johnston, a fierce competitor with the Detroit Briggs, and generally acknowledged as



Zolner Piston basketball, 1939-1940, Industrial League. Standing L to R: Bill Herr, Marlet Marquette, Bob Irons, George Gaton, Bob Symonds. Kneeling L to R: Phil Bail, Joe Grimme, Don Beery, Jim Hilgeman.

softball's best-ever first baseman. With Johnston's arrival, Bennett picked up his glove and bat and went to the office.

Everything started booming all at once.

"When Fred hired me in 1939," Bennett recalls, "we had about twenty-five employees in the plant. We had to use some outsiders to fill out our sports teams in city play. Just a couple of years later we're into heavy piston production, trying to build a reputable softball program beyond local competition and in 1941, we're in the National Basketball League."

Bennett estimates that war-time employment reached 1800, a far cry from the twelve in 1931 and the double-digit employment of thirty to eighty by the late 30s. With Fred busy engineering the heavy duty aluminum pistons, Bennett said he "had free rein with the athletic and promotional programs, obviously with Zollner's stamp of approval."

Recruiting athletic talent was fairly easy, once the players knew that the Zollner program was genuine. Softball was almost a depression-built sport and top stars used it to secure employment. Basketball was in the same boat. The seasons were short and the players had a heavy reliance on off-court jobs. Zollner Machine Works, growing rapidly in defense and wartime production, provided the background that would count heavily in its won-lost columns.

Frank Parson, Stan Lipa, and Len Murray were among early out of town softball recruits to spice up the team. In 1940, Zollner dispatched Bennett to pick up Bernie Kampschmidt, Jim Ramage, and Leo Luken from a Covington, Kentucky, team that had won the 1939 world championship.

Leo Luken was a coming pitcher, but not yet the ace of the team in Covington. He was, Bernie Kampschmidt observed, wild as a March hare.

The star pitcher of Nick Carr's Covington Boosters was Norb Warken. The Dayton-Cincinnati-Covington area was a hotbed of softball, with teams playing every night of the week. Young Leo had begun attending the games, hankering to play, but found he did not know how. He knew a good pitcher when he saw one, and began practicing, modeling himself on Norb Warken. "I never had a pitching lesson in my life," he says.

He had already signed to play for an industrial team in Evansville when he played the Pistons for the Covington team. He left work, drove to Fort Wayne and arrived late at Municipal Beach. As he and his friends

pushed through the crowd, Fred Zollner spotted them. "Hurry up," he said, "We've had hours of practice already."

Leo quickly changed in the beach house, threw two warm-up pitches and then played the game. He won 10-0.

Fred Zollner's reaction was natural. He told Carl Bennett he wanted Leo Luken for his team.

Leo turned them down, because he had so recently signed with the other team. Carl drove down to Evansville and even brought Leo to Fort Wayne for a talk with Fred Zollner. It took a long time for Leo to make up his mind, but eventually, the attractive work package and the difficulties of commuting between Evansville and Covington convinced Leo to make the move. Fred was surprised to receive the call after so long, but the offer was still good.

Leo told Fred that there was a catcher on the Covington team that would add a lot to the Pistons. "We have a catcher," said Fred.

"But," said Leo, "He'd add a lot to the team."

So Fred agreed that Leo could bring Bernie Kampschmidt along.

Leo then added that there was a shortstop on the Covington team that would add a lot to the Pistons. He could play outfield, too. "We have a shortstop," said Fred.

"But," said Leo, "This guy will help on the team." He adds that he knows now he was pressing his luck.

But Fred agreed that Leo could bring Jim Ramage along, too.

The three men drove up on a Sunday, stayed at the Y and reported to Zollner's the next morning. Leo was hired at eighty cents an hour, Bernie and Jim for seventy. They started on the Tuesday.

This trio — Luken, Kampschmidt and Ramage — were the backbone of the Pistons throughout the next decade and a half, and were also stalwarts of the Piston plant. Luken became production chief, Kampschmidt personnel director and Ramage supervisor of a stock room. It was the beginning of a softball dynasty.

Leo knew that his control was not the best, so Fred took Jim, Leo and Bernie out to Harvester Park to practice, having Leo pitch and Jim hit to hone their skills. They spent two hours a day there for two years. Leo remembers, "I developed a curve ball which was unusual in softball in those days."

Of Ramage, Bernie said, "He was a good hitter, fleet of foot and a strong throwing arm. There isn't much more to say than that." Ramage would later race Stan Hood, the batboy, around their hotel when the team was on the road, but Ramage was too fast for him.

Fort Wayne Gallery Of Sport



BOTH OF THESE BOYS ARE FINE HURLERS AND HAVE NOT LOST A GAME IN LOCAL COMPETITION THIS SEASON!

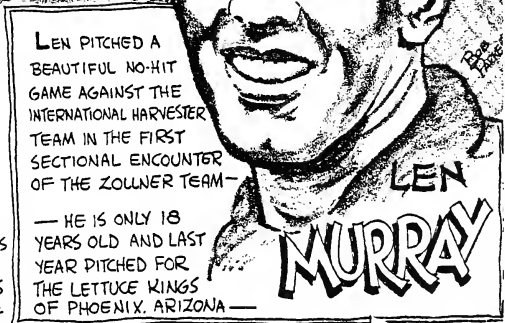


LEO
LUKKEN
OF THE
ZOLLNER
PISTONS
!

-HE HAS PITCHED SOME GRAND BALL THIS SUMMER AFTER A GOOD YEAR WITH COVINGTON, KY. IN 1940



-LEO THROWS ONE OF THE FASTEST BALLS EVER SEEN AROUND HERE



LEN PITCHED A BEAUTIFUL NO-HIT GAME AGAINST THE INTERNATIONAL HARVESTER TEAM IN THE FIRST SECTIONAL ENCOUNTER OF THE ZOLLNER TEAM-

- HE IS ONLY 18 YEARS OLD AND LAST YEAR PITCHED FOR THE LETTUCE KINGS OF PHOENIX, ARIZONA -

Red
Foster

Historians record that softball was invented in 1886, and Dr. Naismith put up his first peach basket in 1891. When Fred Zollner entered both arenas, the sports were still fairly primitive by today's standards.

Softball did not get its name until 1926. The Amateur Softball Association came into being in 1934. Basketball was still using the center jump after every basket until 1937 and there were still a lot of rules to be changed to make the sports more attractive to fans.

Softball claimed to be the nation's number one spectator sport with some 140 million watching but, these were basically non-playing audiences watching a game that was so defensive and pitcher-strong that it became boring.

Zollner would find that out later. In the meantime, loaded with the best pitchers, he tried to pep up the game with changes in rules to improve the offensive strategies. Pitchers at one time were throwing forty feet. This was gradually moved back to forty-three, then forty-five, and now forty-six. In 1945, the Pistons instigated the National Softball League, courting other industrial sponsors, which they felt might be the door-opener to "major league" softball.

Hughie Johnston emphasized the importance of pitching, and that the Pistons were always pitcher-strong. Players from other sports might find the pitching more than they could handle. "It's a matter of timing," Hughie says, "You get used to it." He estimated that some of the better Piston pitchers sent the ball in at 95 miles an hour.

He remembered a spring training session in Clearwater, Florida, when the Philadelphia Phillies were nearby. The Phillies took a batting practice with the Pistons, with Bill West on the mound. With the difference in the distance between pitcher and batter, and the speed, the Phillies had some trouble making a connection.

"In baseball," Hughie explained, "You have a little more time to make a judgment." He said the Pistons' fastest pitchers were Elmer Rohrs and Big Bill West.

Softball had ten players and in 1946, in another offensive maneuver, the tenth man or "short fielder" was eliminated. To further speed up the action an offensive pinch hitter rule was adopted in which someone could pinch hit for the pitcher, but he could remain in the game. A version of this was later adopted by the American League in baseball with their designated hitter rule.

As well as loading up with the game's best pitchers, Fred searched out the cream of the country for every position. Five of his pitchers (Bill West, Clyde "Diz" Kirkendall, Herb Dudley, Leo Luken, and Elmer

Rohrs) have been inducted into the Softball Hall of Fame. Four other players (catcher Bernie Kampschmidt, shortstop Ramage, first baseman Hughie Johnston, and center fielder Sam Lombardo) are also in the Hall. The tenth Piston in the ASA Oklahoma City shrine is Fred himself, the first sponsor so honored.

After trouncing the local competition in 1940 (their record: 44 wins and 14 losses), and with the arrival of Kampschmidt, Luken, and Ramage, the Pistons branched out to broader fields, and better, tougher competition.

In 1941, they went 50-10. They had their first crack at the world's championship in 1942, finishing third.

In climbing the national softball ladder to the top in competition against the best the world could offer, Zollner fielded what may have been the greatest sports team ever assembled. The team won 87% of all games played and had an all-time record winning streak of sixty-nine games that ran into two seasons. One of its pitchers (Luken) won fifty-three straight games.

In the 1946 world tournament, which they won, the Pistons scored twenty-five runs in forty innings on forty-one hits. Their opponents scored one run on twelve hits in forty-two innings. Seven players were on the all-tournament team. Kampschmidt considered this team the best he had managed.

After the Pistons won their third straight world's championship a year later, Fred thought he had a perfect team. "I've got the best players at every position. There are no other players in the country with whom I would replace any one of them."

Piston softball players fondly remember Fred's philosophy in what has now been labeled as a very effective between-games "pep talk."

The Zollners had just lost the first half of a double-header to their arch rivals, the Midland Dow Chemicals. Sammy Lombardo, sweaty and dusty from playing center field, came into the Zollner Stadium locker room, threw down his glove and said, "Fred, you can't win 'em all." Zollner stared at Lombardo and simply asked, "Why?" The Pistons did not have any trouble winning the second game.

Fred Zollner was a visionary. In his aluminum piston world he pioneered and developed bi-metallic pistons (aluminum alloy and ferrous material) for expansion control and wear resistance, and was the holder of several U.S. patents. He also conducted extensive research on turbine engines for land and marine applications.

After he had mopped up all the softball competition, his vision was to build a "major league" of softball — to go out and find comparable sponsors and get a league going that could determine national championships in league-like fashion, as they did in football, basketball, hockey, and baseball.

He built Zollner Stadium to showcase his 1945 and 1946 world champion teams. Prior to its opening in 1947 the team was playing at Fort Wayne's municipal beach park to estimated turnouts of 5000 to 6000 fans.

There was a "free" gate or a pass-the-hat offering to help underwrite the expenses of bringing in the best teams for foes.

Softball was riding a post-war boom, but the nature of the sport eventually determined that the game was oriented more to the participant than the spectator. This was despite all the efforts of Zollner and his staff to take it from a pitcher's game to a hitter's game.

Currently slow pitch softball has grown in popularity, a game of high scoring and easy-to-hit-pitching, while men's fastpitch has been overshadowed by women's fastpitch which will be getting an Olympic audition next time around. It would have been one of Fred Zollner's wildest fantasies to have had his "perfect" team participate in the Olympics. Odds are, he would have made sure they would win.

Zollner's vision in basketball exceeded the Fort Wayne level. After Fred's death in 1982, Joe Falls of the *Detroit News* had this to say about the man and his vision.

"...Truthfully, it was hard to believe he (Fred Zollner) was the owner of the Detroit Pistons because his manner was so gentle. He had a lot of power, but he never let you know it...He never complained about anything...Never for a moment, though, should we forget he was the one -- he and he alone -- who brought pro basketball to our city. He believed in the city in ways other could not understand. He believed the game would go here, and he made the move from Fort Wayne, Indiana in 1957 even as others laughed at him...He had a vision, and he saw the day when the NBA would rank with the other professional leagues of the land. He may have been blind, but his feelings for the game never wavered...He never big-timed it. If anything, he made certain everyone was cared for. He gave his players meal money, but he also made sure they had nice meals on the plane, even if it

was only sandwiches and beer in some cities...The other owners took advantage of him in the conference rooms of the NBA. They always gave him the worst dates, while asking him for handouts, and still he never complained. Fred Zollner just was glad to see the game growing, and who knows, tomorrow might be a better day. Now, there are no more tomorrows...but let's not forget all the yesterdays."

Just as Zollner's and its twelve employees had found Fort Wayne a fine place for a home after Duluth, so did the ballplayers. No sponsor in either basketball or softball offered the opportunities in work and play like Fred. Most softball sponsors could not offer full-time jobs. Kamp-schmidt, as an example, worked for a relative and played for three or four teams for a few dollars in expenses. One sponsor, Nick Carr's Covington Boosters, came up with a couple of good pitchers and lucked into a world championship.

Zollner could offer regular employment, a versatile schedule and lifetime work at the employee's discretion. The taskmaster production department would determine if the athletes could do the jobs.

Basketball was in the same arena. The country was gearing up for war. Travel would be restricted. The National Basketball League was wobbly and the most famous touring pros, the Celtics, Harlem Globetrotters, and New York Rens were filling the seats at fewer and fewer of their one-night stands.

Zollner's was a defense-war plant and offered a permanent home. It was tough to pass up. Local heroes, Curly Armstrong and Herm Schaefer, were getting out of college and basking in the glory of their 1940 NCAA championship at Indiana University and looking for work.

Under these circumstances, working at and playing for Zollner was inviting. For their inaugural season in the National Basketball League schedule, Bennett had already signed Elmer Gainer, who had a good college career at DePaul, and Carlisle (Blackie) Towery, whom Coach Ed Diddle proclaimed the greatest player in Western Kentucky history. Towery had led Western Kentucky to a third place finish in the NCAA.

Soon after the season started, Fred had courted the brightest young star from the aging Celtics — long-shot expert Bobby McDermott. When McDermott saw it was for real, he talked his play-making teammate, Paul Birch, into coming along.

McDermott became a Fort Wayne legend and is now enshrined in the Basketball Hall of Fame.

From the day that Fred Zollner picked up his franchise for the 1941 season, professional basketball found its most stabilizing factor in the history of the sport. For thirty-four consecutive seasons he did everything in his power to make it a better game.

Pete Waldmeir of the *Detroit News* summed it up very succinctly in his obituary when Fred died in 1982.

The Z was the League's money man, a wealthy eccentric who was a soft touch for anybody who wanted to borrow a few bucks — or a few hundred thousand — to keep the sheriff out of the locker room. His fellow owners never failed to take advantage of his good nature and his love of the game. Zollner owned an executive DC-3 aircraft, appropriately called the Flying Z, which was fitted with such amenities as a bar, reclining easy chairs, a sofa, a "picture window" and booster rockets to help lift it out of dinky airstrips. Because his team had use of the plane, the Z's team always got the worst schedule in the league. After all, the other owners reasoned, the Pistons didn't have to put up with airline schedules...There are so many stories...so much to tell. But then, with the Z, there always were. One of the last interviews I did with him ended the way I might end this..."That's about all I have to say," the Z concluded, pleasantly. "You know me well enough to write it without having to resort to the knife. I don't need any surgery."

Two weeks into the 1941-42 season, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and World War II was on. Seven teams persisted through a twenty-four game schedule in the National Basketball League.

The Pistons' first NBL team consisted of Curly Armstrong, Blackie Towery, Herm Schaefer, Elmer Gainer, Jack Keller, Red Oberbrunner, Dale Hamilton, Don Beery, and Jim Hilgeman. Three games into the league season McDermott was signed and later on, for the final eight games, Birch came in.

Herm Schaefer was the team's first coach. He had gone to Chicago with Bennett to talk to Leo Fischer about more exhibition games

and that was the trip which ended with Fischer coming to Fort Wayne and signing Fred up for a franchise in the league.

The other teams were the Oshkosh All-Stars, the Akron Goodyear Wingfoot, the Indianapolis Kautskys, Sheboygan Redskins, Chicago Bruins, and the Toledo Jim White Chevrolets.

The Pistons did well in their pro debut, tying for second with Akron's 15-9 record. The pro veterans from Oshkosh (to whom the Pistons lost in their pro tournament start in Chicago the previous year) won the league championship with a superior 20-4 record.

The All-Stars led by veteran Leroy (Cowboy) Edwards beat Indianapolis two straight and Fort Wayne, two out of three for the playoff championship. The Pistons had eliminated the Goodyears in the semi-finals.

Oshkosh proved it was no fluke as the team went on to win the world's pro tournament in Chicago, polishing off the Harlem Globetrotters and defending champion Detroit Eagles along the way.

The instant successes of his softball and basketball teams thrust Fred Zollner into the spotlight, a situation which he did not seek. Like his father Theodore, Fred never took time to let himself be too impressed with himself. He barely tolerated the spotlight but still enjoyed his place on the bench to be supportive and sometimes corrective. He waved off any personal attention at civic functions or award ceremonies.

"By the mid-forties, the Pistons were the talk of the town and people wanted to pay him homage," Bennett said. "But it took three years for him to agree to accept the United Commercial Travelers' award as Fort Wayne's Man of the Year in 1947."

In 1944, Fred did accept the Naismith Trophy at a Chamber of Commerce dinner. It was a symbol of the world championship which the Pistons had won for the first time and Leo Fischer, president of the National Basketball League, came from Chicago to present it.

Zollner had a keen sense of civic responsibility and dutifully served on the board of directors of the Chamber of Commerce. He took more pride in sitting in the board room of Lincoln National Bank for thirty years, a position earned by his astute business judgment and impeccable credit history. More dutiful than characteristic, he held memberships in the Masonic Lodge and Scottish Rite. Fred also had a longterm association with the Society of Automotive Engineers.

Managing the softball team and coaching the basketball team were almost arranged by committee in the early days. The Koch brothers, Harold and Mel, were among a few of the employees who approached

Fred about sponsoring a softball team in 1938. Jim Hilgeman was among the prime advisors in basketball, as well as being a pitcher on the softball team.

When Hilgeman asked Zollner to give the basketball players a few hours' rest before their championship playoff game against International Harvester in 1940, Fred thought that was a little bit shortsighted and turned over the basic managerial reins to Carl Bennett.

After the Pistons beat Harvester 37-35 for a spot in the 1941 pro tournament, Indiana University's Herm Schaefer was signed to be playing coach as Zollner's moved into its first year in the National Basketball League.

This merely stresses the point that building the piston factory was Fred's highest priority and that the sports venue was still a part-time hobby. Harold Koch was the softball manager. Zollner and Bennett were bench-side every game and a year later (1943), Kampschmidt came in as catcher and team captain.

Harold Koch deserves credit for having planted the seed of the softball team. He organized the first team, obtained the uniforms and led the team to the first local league games.

Through the heavier playing schedule and his plant responsibilities, Koch gradually eased out as field manager and Kampschmidt took over in 1946.

Basketball was equally "intramural." Schaefer as player-coach and Bennett as manager made the substitutions and lineup changes. When Schaefer went into the service two years later, McDermott was named player-coach but Bennett still managed from his bench position. Bennett officially became coach when McDermott left during the 1946-47 season but the strategy still prevailed as Curly Armstrong became playing captain and ran the team on the floor.

Bennett was head coach into the first season of the National Basketball Association but when the Pistons lost their first six games, Fred stepped in and named Armstrong officially as the player-coach. The player-coach-captain-manager status prevailed until 1950 when Zollner (and Bennett) lured Murray Mendenhall away from the Anderson Packers of the NBL. So Mendenhall actually became Fort Wayne's first "bench" coach without player status or ties to the front office.

It was surprising to many Fort Wayne fans that the Zollners could woo Mendenhall back to Fort Wayne, but perhaps less of a surprise than when Mendy left Central High to go to the Anderson, Indiana, Packers. In Biemiller's piece in *Holiday* magazine, Mendenhall was described as "a

silver-headed, hawk-faced athlete.... He is a quiet bland man with an almost ministerial air away from the heat of the game, but when his fast-breaking Pistons begin to drive, he turns pure tiger.... Despite his current career, he will always be Central's coach to many local citizens."²

When the BAA merged with the NBL to form the National Basketball Association in 1949-50, Mendenhall became the Pistons' first coach in the NBA. He started out with a 40-28 record, but when he slipped to 32-36 the next year, he was unceremoniously relegated to his "Fort Wayne citizen" status. It was a sign that Zollner was becoming more personally involved with his basketball franchise.

Mendenhall's run-and-shoot style had not worked out. The Pistons could win their share in friendly North Side Gym but did not do too well in Madison Square Garden, Boston Gardens, or on other road games. Fred reverted to the formula that had served well in the beginning — good old-fashioned pro style, give and go. The teacher would be Coach Paul Birch, one of Bobby McDermott's cronies on the original Celtics and the second "old pro" signed with Fort Wayne in 1941-42. Paul and Mac led the Pistons to three world titles.

When Mendenhall came on board, Curly Armstrong had voluntarily stepped aside as a coach. The Pistons' BAA experience (1948-49) was Fort Wayne's worst record in pro ball. Armstrong, a home town hero ever since he helped Indiana to the NCAA championship, stayed on as a player and was honored with a special night, February 7, 1951. He was the only player, from point of service, to have played ten years consecutively for one team in organized basketball. His service included a stint in the Navy. He also played on the world champion Pistons softball team.

Fred Zollner enjoyed the element of surprise. He provided plenty during the Pistons time in Fort Wayne, starting with his jumping into the National Basketball League in 1941 with a local industrial league team. The first shocker came three games into that first season when he signed Bobby McDermott from the New York Celtics. McDermott was acknowledged as the best pro player in the business, and later when Birch also joined the club, Fort Wayne finished second and lost a two-of-three playoff to the veteran Oshkosh All-Stars in the championship playoff.

The Zollner procurement program was almost foolproof. There was little money in the game, and coming out of a depression and moving

² "Hoop Happy Town," February 1951, p.76.

into a war, the players needed full-time jobs besides basketball. Pro basketball was a long time away from being full-time.

Players could go on the Zollner Machine Works payroll (at inflated salaries) and at the end of the season, after deducting nominal expenses, the players would divide up the gate receipts. "I think the players drew \$100 a week from the company (which was good money)," Bennett recalled, "and then they would split up the 'kitty.'" It seems that would amount to about \$2200 or \$2500 per man." It was easy to attract players. Glenn Dickey in his *The History of Professional Basketball* called them "the best team in NBL history."

Resurrecting Birch as head coach was a good directional change for Zollner. Few players or coaches knew the game better than Birch. Getting it across to the players was another matter.

Birch started putting the pieces back together gradually. His first year, 1951-52, the team ended with a record of 29-37, and was lucky to make the playoffs, bounced out by Rochester in two games. The next year they made 36-33, knocked Rochester out of the playoffs and lost the Western Division finals to the eventual champions, Minneapolis, three out of five.

Even though the team climbed to 40-28 in Birch's third year, the die was cast. Birch could never escape the old-fashioned approach to handling his personnel. He created a drill-sergeant atmosphere. Stanley Frank, of the New York *Herald Tribune*, said that "Birch operated with the grim intensity of a cop looking for his stolen patrol car and seemed to go out of his way to antagonize the players and fans."

George Yardley, who would become the first player in NBA history to score more than two thousand points in a single season, was an innocent victim of the Birch psyche. Yardley graduated from Stanford in 1950, but opted to stay in school another year, play AAU ball and go to the 1952 Olympics.

"The Bird" had broken the great Hank Luisetti's scoring records at Stanford, was AAU's All-American for three years and was casually indifferent to Fred Zollner's "blush" of \$6000. Yardley had missed his Olympic opportunity with a broken hand, and finally signed for \$9500.

Because he had been drafted by Bennett and Mendenhall, there was some resistance by Birch to welcome him with open arms. So the beginning of Yardley's pro career was off to a shaky start. Zollner could not have been happy with this early rejection. In fact, the Minneapolis Lakers dangled a very attractive trade offer, the seasoned Jim Pollard. Both Zollner and Birch favored old pros to the "ice cream kids" coming

out of college. Bennett, as athletic director, had the biggest argument of his life in justifying the retention of Yardley even before he stepped into a Zollner uniform.

Yardley proved Bennett right, despite a frustrating first year when he spent too much time on the bench. In his four Fort Wayne years, George became the Pistons' all-time scoring champion. In the franchise's first year in Detroit, he broke the two thousand point barrier.

Yardley joined a team in rebellion against the coach. In Charles Salzberg's *From Set Shot to Slam Dunk*, Yardley said, "Birch was a marvelous talent, a marvelous teacher, but every time we'd get behind in a game, we'd say, 'Well, this is Birch's loss, to hell with him.' Everybody was united against our coach."³

Fort Wayne's leading sportscaster, Hilliard Gates, said, "Birch tied the players into knots and tore down their confidence with incessant criticism."

Birch's fate had been sealed when Zollner had to fly to Minneapolis during the season to quiet an open rebellion among the team's players. Things calmed down after Birch heard the players air their grievances and the Pistons came back strong and won five in a row. But Birch alienated the players again and the war continued.

"I decided by midseason to get rid of Birch," Zollner told Stanley Frank in a *Saturday Evening Post* interview. At the end of the 1952-53 season Zollner had extended Birch's contract two more years for reaching the goal of pushing the club back over the .500 mark.

Fred could not make the change in midseason. He could not even approach the man he had in mind as a replacement. It would have been unethical. But it would be another whopping Zollner surprise.

The Pistons finished with an excellent 40-32 record, but, demoralized, they evaporated in the playoffs, losing four straight in a round-robin affair with Minneapolis and Rochester.

The name in the envelope was Charley Eckman, a thirty-three-year-old loud-mouthed NBA referee.

After he had bought out Birch's contract, Zollner toyed with the speculative press, saying he would hire a coach who had been associated with the NBA for many years. There were many guesses: Bob Davies, an old rival with Rochester but well-respected in the Fort Wayne arena; Jim Pollard of Minneapolis, who wore some of the Laker championship rings; current Piston players Andy Phillip and Frankie Brian.

³ p. 157.

The announcement was not merely a surprise. It stunned Fort Wayne and the NBA community. Piston fans, with their basic home court verbosity, were never courtly to those who whistled fouls against their team.

The ploy nearly worked. The coach who had never coached made a complete change in the players' lives. With fast stories and profane talk, he brought the team around to his way of thinking. They were willing to play for him in a way they had not for Paul Birch.

The Official NBA Basketball Encyclopedia remarked, "Fred Zollner, its owner, had startled everyone by making Charley Eckman the coach—the same Eckman who had been a referee in the NBA for years. That he succeeded was taken as something of an insult by the experienced professional coaches."⁴

The Pistons had gone all the way to the finals of the NBA World Series. They lost 92-91 to Syracuse. George King, later athletic director at Purdue, sank the winning free throw with twelve seconds left.

The Nationals had overcome an eighteen point deficit. On the inbounds play after King's free throw, King hacked Phillip, but a whistle was never blown, even for the whistle blowing coach. Fred Zollner's dream of a NBA championship remained unfulfilled.

While the signing of Eckman appeared impulsive, it was definitely not. Zollner had been trailing the fiery, flippant referee ever since a barroom meeting in Milwaukee when the teams, coaches and officials were stranded after an NBA double header.

Stanley Frank wrote:

...a group of basketball people including the Fort Wayne owner, Fred Zollner, met around a convivial watering hole in the Schroeder Hotel. George Mikan, who had just scored twenty-seven points, was in a benign mood. 'That wasn't a bad game you worked tonight,' he said condescendingly to Eckman.

'I called a better game than you big oafs played,' Eckman snapped. 'I'd like to coach you monkeys and teach you new tricks.'

⁴ *The Official NBA Basketball Encyclopedia*, edited by Zander Hollander and Alex Sachare (1989), p.65.

'It was one of those flip answers Eckman always pops,' Fred Zollner relates now, 'but something in his voice convinced me he was serious. I wasn't in the market for a coach. Birch had just signed a three-year contract, and there were no complaints against him yet. I filed Eckman's crack for future reference. The more I thought of it, the more sense it made....'

'During the next two years I made a point of bumping into Eckman and chatting with him. He didn't suspect I was scouting him. I discussed everything except basketball to get an idea of his philosophy and attitude toward people.'⁵

Frank's article was a portent of what lay ahead for Fort Wayne pro basketball. He pointed out that the change in players' attitudes had also made a difference at the gate. Fort Wayne had been averaging more than 4000 admissions at home games.

The article was an early public mention of the differences between the team owners concerning Fort Wayne's status in the league. It was so much smaller than the other cities, a smaller market even though Indiana was famous for its interest in basketball.

Frank quoted Fred Zollner: "I've dropped more than three hundred thousand dollars in pro basketball during the last fifteen years.... It never bothered me until this season. I'll be honest and admit the team does not cost me a nickel personally. I write off the loss as a tax deduction for consumer advertising. I'll also concede the team is priceless publicity for my company. It offends me as a businessman, though to lose money with a good product offered in fine facilities."

In the end, that led to the team's departure from Fort Wayne. But while it and its softball partner were here, they were at the heart of the community.

⁵ "Coaching the pros is a cinch, he says," *Saturday Evening Post*, Feb.19,1955, p.112.

Zollner Pistons Softball

1942

Fred Zollner told Carl Bennett to "schedule some tougher competition, move into more regional play, let's be the best. If we're going to do it, let's do it right." What he probably meant was, "Let's beat the Bendix Brakes from South Bend."

Bendix had been the dominant team from Indiana. So the Pistons started loading up. The Zollner plant was growing, so why not hire some good ball players in the process?

With this in mind, the Pistons hired Frank Parson, a good catcher, from Detroit. The Z's added Stan Lipa and Len Murray, two crack pitchers, and Frank Kowal.

At the end of the 1940 season they raided the Covington, Kentucky, world champions by signing pitcher Leo Luken, Bernie Kampschmidt and Jim Ramage, who could play infield or outfield. That was the start of something big and was a good mix for a Piston team that had outgrown the Fort Wayne competition and was looking for broader horizons.

The Zollners had already had a 44-14 record in 1940 and improved that to 50-10 in 1941. But Bendix still would not let them get out of the state. South Bend won the state championship in 1941 and then went on to the world championship from there.

It had taken the Brakes eight years to climb to the summit. But they had stopped the ambitious Fort Wayne club at the state line as the Pistons started taking their national aspirations seriously. South Bend became the first team from the Hoosier state to win the world's Amateur Softball Association championship. The Brakes qualified for the world's tournament by being the world champs, but Fort Wayne had to work its way through regional and state play to get a shot at the world title by winning the Super Regional.

They beat the Elkhart Excels to win the Elkhart Regional and then beat the East Chicago Superheaters and Warsaw Power Kings. Leo Luken had to go 12 innings to beat the Allison Boosters in the first game of the double elimination and Len Murray won the second.

World War II was at hand and in order to meet work schedules and cut down travel, the super-regional was created to determine which teams would go to the nationals. The Pistons beat the state champs from



Zollner Piston softball, 1942. Front row L to R: manager Harold Koch, Stan Lipa, Gene Nahrwold, Jim Ramage, Ron Burgette, Tony Sparks, Porky Slater. Middle row L to R: Frank Parson, Bernie Kampschmidt, Len Murray, Carl Bennett, Leo Luken, Hank Doehrmann. Top row L to R: John Shaffer, Paul 'Curly' Armstrong, Chet Nahrwold, Bob Baker, Stan Corgan

West Virginia on a forfeit; Len Murray pitched, Ramage helped with a homer and the Zollners beat the tough Columbus Ferguson State Auditors, 2-1. The semifinals were an ironic pairing, pitting the Pistons against the Detroit Bunts. The Bunts' pitcher was Norb Warken, who had been a teammate of Fort Wayne's Kentucky imports.

Kampschmidt still remembers Warken as "one of the best pitchers ever seen in the game." Luken, supported by Porky Slater's eleventh home run of the year, won the duel and the Pistons moved into the finals against the Sixth Ward Boosters of Newport, the 1939 world champs. It must have given Luken an interesting feeling to win a game from the pitcher on whom he had modeled his own play.

The Pistons were undefeated going against Newport in the double elimination. Pitching for Newport was Big Bill West, who answered all the criteria for becoming a Zollner Piston star in the future. He beat the Zollners, 3-1.

In the deciding game, Murray came back strong and the Pistons beat down a weary West to gain a spot in the World. Newport made it interesting and had the bases loaded in the last inning before sending Fort Wayne to its first crack at the ASA World Championships.

The tournament was played at the University of Detroit Stadium and Fort Wayne came home with everything but the championship. Players on the team flying the Piston banner were Manager Harold Koch, Lipa, Gene Nickolin, Ramage, Ron Burgette, Tony Sparks, Slater, Parson, Kampschmidt, Murray, Bennett, Luken, Hank Doerhman, John Shaffer, Curly Armstrong, Chet Nahrwold and Bob Baker.

They went six games before the Deep Rock Oilers of Tulsa, Oklahoma, finally knocked them out in the semi-finals, 2-0. Technically the Pistons were the third place finisher, but theoretically, everyone conceded that they were the second best team in the land.

Piston pitchers had accounted for two of the four no-hitters in the tournament; the team had scored 21 runs to opponents' nine in the six games and had out-hit them 38-13. Luken went 23 innings, giving up just one run on four hits.

The Zollners started out by beating Maryland, 7-0, and came back with a 2-1 win over North Carolina. Defending champion South Bend started strong by pinning the Detroit Briggs 4-1. Both Briggs and Bendix had won their opening games (from Massachusetts and Alabama).

The Brakes then hung a 5-2 loss on the Pistons. Briggs meanwhile marched to the finals with straight victories over North Carolina, Arizona, Chicago and Oklahoma. Bendix lost its first game to

Fort Wayne Gallery Of Sport

That Old Familiar Cry
to Softball Fans —

BATTERY FOR ZOLLNERS



**STAN
LIPA**

and

**BERNIE
KAMPSCHMIDT**



STAN IS THE
ACE OF THE
ZOLLNER PITCHING
STAFF, HAVING
HURLED CONSISTENTLY
FINE BALL THE PAST
TWO SEASONS!

HE CAME TO
FORT WAYNE
FROM
MICHIGAN CITY

UNDERHAND
STUFF!

BERNIE
IS A FINE
CATCHER AND
ONE OF THE
SUREST HITTERS
ON THE CLUB

HE HAILS FROM THE
COVINGTON, KY. TEAM
WHERE HE CAUGHT
THE SLANTS OF LEO
LUKEN LAST YEAR!

LAST YEAR, SOUTH BEND BENDIX
DRAFTED HIM FROM ZOLLNERS FOR
THE NATIONAL TOURNEY — HE STOPPED
COLORADO 7 TO 0 WITH ONE HIT AND
WENT 14 INNINGS TO BEAT TORONTO

STAN PITCHED THE ENTIRE
CITY TOURNAMENT LAST YEAR
WITHOUT ALLOWING A RUN —



Joe
Fawer

Oklahoma, 3-2, and the Pistons polished them off, 2-0, for South Bend's second loss in the double elimination event.

Briggs stayed alive with a 3-2 win over Oklahoma. Deep Rock, Fort Wayne, and Detroit all had one loss and Fort Wayne was eliminated by a 2-0 loss to the Oilers. Oklahoma then beat Briggs by the same score for the championship.

When the Pistons beat South Bend in their "semi-final," it may have been the Pistons' most significant win in their short but hurried climb to national attention. As Chris Savage of the *New-Sentinel* opined: "It took Bendix eight years to get to the top; it took Tulsa six years, but the Pistons only two years of building for the big time."

Although they were shut out on four hits in the final, the Pistons' offense was awesome during the tournament. Doehrman went 5-for-11 (homer, two triples, and two singles). He also had two walks and a pair of sacrifices. Ramage was 5-for-17, Slater 5-for-18, and Armstrong 5-for-19. Ramage had five RBIs with Nickolin collecting four.

For the season, Luken was 29-2, Lipa was 20-2, and Murray was 16-7, giving a season mark of 65-12 against all comers.

1943

Just two wins away from an almost unbelievable world championship in 1942, the priorities of World War II were reshaping the dreams of the sports spectrum.

Pitcher Len Murray had been the first of Fred's sports stars to be called into military service. Curly Armstrong, who doubled in both sports, had just won the Most Valuable Player Award at the basketball world's tournament, where the Pistons had been nosed out by Oshkosh for the championship. With the MVP trophy under his arm, Armstrong hustled off for the Navy.

He had been one of the cogs in Fort Wayne's valiant try for the softball championship at the end of 1942, "a tough man on the ball field," as Hughie Johnston described him. Also called to service were Ramage, Nicholin, Baker, and Doehrman. All had played prominent roles in the Pistons' meteoric rise, beating natural rivals South Bend Bendix' and Detroit Briggs along the way.

To fill the gap, the Pistons signed Hughie Johnston as first baseman. Johnston was as fierce a competitor as the game has known, heavy hitter and team leader.

The Bendix Brakes company withdrew from softball sponsorship because of the war and it was easy to pick up its pitching star, Stan Corgan. Pro basketballers Bobby McDermott and Paul Birch fit in the "all around athlete" category and played well enough to supplement the softball effort.

With their 1942 success, the Pistons first line of sight was to make sure a six-game series with South Bend was on the schedule. Although some sponsors dropped out because of the war and its travel restrictions, corporate concern for morale at the plant and on the home-front helped pick up the softball pace in 1943. With the series against South Bend as a guideline, several midwestern teams fell into a six-game round robin schedule that would eventually mold the National Fastball and National Industrial Fastball League patterns.

Interested teams were the Midland Dow Chemicals, never a factor before, Chicago Match Corporation, Peoria Diesel Cater-pillars, and Cleveland Midland Steel. Some teams found willing sponsors in political arenas: South Bend switched to the Molnar Sheriffs; Newport had the Sixth Ward Boosters; and Joe Ferguson had always fielded an excellent team as the Columbus, Ohio, State Auditors.

In the round robin play at this level, the Pistons wound up with the best record of thirty-five wins and ten losses. Luken and Corgan shared the pitching burden throughout the season. Team members were Luken, Kampschmidt, Tony Sparks, Ron Burgette, Slater, Ev Huth, Hughie Johnston, Bennett, Shaffer, Birch, McDermott, and Billy Johnston. Billy was the younger brother of Hughie and a good short fielder or second baseman who played for awhile on his way to the Marines from Hillsdale College. Gerry Wagner was picked up from Detroit to fill out the season.

Hughie and Bill Johnston had been born in Ireland and stopped off in Canada before growing up in Detroit. Bill later observed that softball was a way of acquiring a job during the Depression. Both brothers had played for a number of teams in the Detroit area, "working our way up," until Fred Zollner offered them a better deal.

Hughie was playing for the Briggs in Detroit. When the Pistons came up to play them, he became friendly with Curly Armstrong. Curly suggested he consider moving to Fort Wayne, but Hughie did not give it much thought. One day, Fred Zollner invited him to come down for a chat.

They talked, and while Hughie was considering, the Piston basketball team left for a tourney in Chicago. Hughie went along. When he got back, he was asked if he had any expenses, and then was handed a



Zolner Piston softball, 1943. Seated L to R: Frank Parson, Ron Burgette, Leo Luken, John Shaffer, Porky Slater. Standing L to R: manager Harold Koch, Bernie Kampschmidt, Jerry Wagner, Hughie Johnston, Tony Sparks.

generous check. He decided this was the place for him. Despite the fact that he might have had a chance to play baseball elsewhere, he has never been sorry he came to Fort Wayne.

He also told Fred Zollner about two other Briggs players who would benefit the Pistons, Bill Johnston and Ed Robitaille. The three had been together in pickup games as youngsters, with the Burr Patterson team in Detroit, then the Briggs. They would eventually stay together on the Pistons.

With all of the personnel changes, it turned out to be more or less a makeshift season, particularly following the hurricane finish of 1942. Things started out shakily when the Z's lost a double-header to Midland, a team that had never beaten them before. Luken wound up winning his usual thirty games. Overall the team posted 63-15 against all comers.

All the Piston home games were played at the Municipal Beach in Fort Wayne, which provided a mecca for northeastern Indiana sports fans. The major teams were brought in for week-end double headers. Fred Zollner, generous as he could be while still committed to the war plant effort, was more lenient with his team's out-of-town games, giving Fort Wayne fans a chance to see some of the best possible opponents on a steady week-end diet.

It was a free gate, no turnstiles. A freewill offering was taken up to help defray the visiting team's expenses. Crowd estimates ranged as high as 8,000 to 10,000 but usually all estimated attendances tend to be inflated. It still was Fort Wayne's prime attraction.

The Pistons still had to go through the paces to qualify for the national ASA tournament through state and regional eliminations. Midway through the season the Pistons were 22-8 against their peers. Along the way they split a series with Midland. Clyde (Lefty) Dexter was their best pitcher. The Columbus Auditors split. The Pistons gave Warren (Speed) Gerber his first loss of the year, but Fort Wayne could not beat their Clyde (Diz) Kirkendall. Both Gerber and Kirkendall are in the Softball Hall of Fame. Kirkendall would later become a Zollner player.

In the state tournament the unheralded Hebron (Indiana) Seeds threw a slight scare into the Z's. The Pistons, behind Stan Corgan, knocked Hebron into the loser's bracket but the Seeds battled back into the finals by beating Muncie, 2-1, before Luken settled them down 5-2.

That qualified Fort Wayne for the Super-Regional, hosted by Fort Wayne at Municipal Beach. After an opening bye, the Pistons breezed by the Indianapolis Allisons, 11-1, but then were upset by Midland 1-0. The Peoria Caterpillars then knocked the Zollners out of the tournament, 1-0,

Fort Wayne Gallery Of Sport



JIM IS A SWELL
SHORTSTOP WHO
GOES AFTER
EVERYTHING
THAT COMES
HIS WAY!

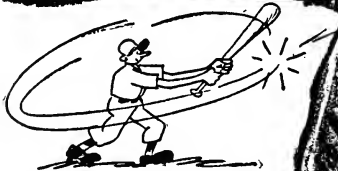
JIM RAMAGE

— HE HAILS FROM THE —
COVINGTON, KY. TEAM OF 1940!

HE IS ONE OF
THE REALLY
DEPENDABLE
HITTERS OF THE
ZOLLNER PISTONS



JIM IS
THE
SMALLEST
PLAYER ON
THE SQUAD



BOB IS A LONG BALL
HITTER WHO HAS
ACCOUNTED FOR MORE
HOME RUNS THIS SUMMER
THAN ANY OF HIS TEAMMATES — HE HAS PLAYED A
LOT OF BASEBALL LOCALLY AND WAS A MEMBER OF THE
CINCINNATI REDS FARM SYSTEM FOR A WHILE!

BOB BAKER



Bob
Baker

and that ended the season for Fort Wayne without a chance to go to the ASA and to build on their 1942 laurels. Midland beat Peoria to win the trip to Detroit.

Hammer Field of California, an army unit, won the world tournament with pitcher Al Linde, later a Zollner nemesis, as the star. Linde had played on the Deep Rock Oilers when they beat the Pistons in the 1942 semifinals.

1944

Failure to get out of the Super-Regionals in 1943 fevered Fred Zollner's passion to "win it all." The South Bend team was gradually breaking up. Their star pitcher, Ike Bierwagen, was in the service. The Pistons had already plucked Stan Corgan for their own pitching corps.

The Piston's impact and Zollner influence were growing within the ASA. Fred was a model sponsor and an excellent example for other corporations. Fort Wayne got Chick Goldberg, Ed Cieslik and Monday Cieselski to jump from South Bend but announced they "will not become employees of the plant but will be available (and eligible) for all games."

Ordinarily this would be a violation of their amateur status. The Pistons started reloading in 1944. They also added Lou Bertso of Ann Arbor, Michigan, who had finished the last part of the 1943 season with Midland when that team went to the nationals.

Tony Sparks and Gerry Wagner had departed. Softball interest was perking up. Chicago scheduled a spring major softball tournament, pre-Memorial Day, and the Amateur Softball Association booked a National Industrial Softball Tournament at Mack Park in Detroit for July 1-4. The winner would get an exemption for the world's tournament.

The 1944 roster for Zollner shaped up like this: Monday Cieselski, Porky Slater, Lou Bertso, Hughie Johnston, Chick Goldberg (The Leaner), captain Bernie Kampschmidt, Ron Burgette, Paul Birch, Frank Parson, Johnny Shaffer, manager Harold Koch, Stan Corgan, Ed Cieslik, Leo Luken, Carl Bennett and, in mid-season, Neal Barille.

With both Corgan and Luken throwing one-hitters, the Pistons polished off Evanston and the Milwaukee Rustic Gardens in their Chicago tournament bracket, but the championship game against Chicago Match was rained out, to be settled later in the season.

Hoping to use the industrial tournament as their free ticket to the ASA World championships, the Pistons breezed into Detroit with only

three losses for the whole season. They trampled the Detroit Hudson, 11-0, and Evansville Briggs to enter the finals of the double-elimination tournament unbeaten. Corgan and Luken were still carrying all of the pitching load and Detroit Briggs surprised Zollners with a double-whammy, 4-1 and 3-2.

That sent the Pistons back to "qualifying school," which meant they would have to go through state and super-regional tournaments on the road to the World, the site of which had now been switched to Cleveland's Lakewood Stadium.

After the shocking loss to Briggs in the Industrial, it was a determined Fort Wayne Zollner team that headed into the rest of the season with a defiant "look out world, here we come" attitude. They stormed through the rest of the season, including the state and super-regional tournaments without losing another game. Among the games was a 7-2 win over the Chicago Match team, which gave the Pistons the Major League spring tournament championship, and the John Owen trophy for the bulging Zollner trophy case.

They evened the score with arch-rival Midland. The Dows had not beaten them all year. Diz Kirkendall had switched his pitching finesse to Cleveland and he could not beat the Z's either.

On the "if you can't beat them, join 'em" theory, the Pistons finally got speedster Neal Barille on their roster. They had been negotiating for a couple of seasons but could not convince Barille to leave his home town of Cleveland.

Nicknamed "Lightning" for his speedy base running, Barille grew up in fast company. He went to school at Cleveland East Tech with Jesse Owens, who was billed as the "world's fastest human" when he set four world records in one day in his charge toward Olympic stardom.

Barille immediately moved into the leadoff position and was a huge addition to the Piston's offense despite his short stature. He was a pinch hitter, drew a lot of walks, and his base running was phenomenal. He became famous for his head-first slides.

Barille was a sparkplug that kept the offense humming. The heavy artillery was coming from Johnston, Kampschmidt, the newcomers Goldberg, Cieslik and Cieselski, Birch (most improved hitter) and Shaffer. There was bench strength from Bertso, Burgette and Parson while Slater was the veteran of the club (in his fifth year).

It was a unique happenstance that Zollner's had two entries in the 1944 state tournament. The Zollner reserve club, a plant-sponsored team in the local Main Auto League, worked its way through the elimination

channels to the state. The reserve club, as the name implies, was a secondary or "farm" club for the classic Pistons. The Zollner team had a free pass to the state, but the Reserve Club earned it way in by beating Bueters, Horton Washers, Harvester, GE and Studebaker in the sectional; Bluffton and Huntington in the regional; and Goshen in the super-regional played at Mishawaka.

On that Reserve Club were Red Miller, Earl Rickey, Walt Lundquist, Paul Kessey, Bruno Gulbin, Howard High, Steve Kowal, Furman (Red) Smith, Ev Huth, Bill Speck, Buddy Jeannette, Joe Koehnlein, Frank Kowal and manager Ray Yarman. The reserve club lost in the state to Evansville Briggs, but with one more win could have challenged the parent club in the finals.

Hughie Johnston had enjoyed playing with the Detroit Briggs, who were now among Fort Wayne's chief rivals. Hughie says that many of the Briggs players were Polish. He particularly remembers Jake Mazer. Jake played the outfield, where he was a good player but sometimes needed guidance in judgment.

Jake could catch a pop fly with the best, but if someone else was going for it, they could call out, "I've got it, Jake," and he would step aside.

In a game after he came to the Pistons, Hughie Johnston was on second when someone else hit a fly to the outfield. It was headed straight for Jake Mazer. Before it reached him, Hughie called out softly, "I've got it, Jake," and Jake stepped aside. Hughie ran to third and home, while poor Jake looked foolish in the outfield.

The Pistons continued their winning streak into the world championship play at Cleveland. Three straight wins over Phoenix, Salt Lake City and the Ferguson Auditors put them into the quarter-finals against also unbeaten Hammer Field (California) Raiders, the defending champs.

In one of the classic games of tournament history, Al Linde led his Raiders to a 2-1, 18-inning victory that dumped Fort Wayne into the loser's bracket. Both teams scored runs in the first inning and scored no more until the 18th.

Linde was almost a one-man gang. At one point Cieselski doubled and Hughie Johnston powered one that had "home run" written on it but, Linde, now playing left field, pulled it down at the fence to spoil a game winner. A walk, single and error game saw Hammer Field achieve its winning run in the 18th inning at 1:30 a.m.!

The Pistons battled back to the finals, ousting Columbus, 3-2. It was the fifth straight time Zollners had whipped the Auditors and gave Luken his 30th win of the year, about par for his course.

The Columbus game started at 7 o'clock and Fort Wayne had to come right back to play Hammer Field at its conclusion. It was Stan Corgan against Linde in the finale but the Pistons could not get Corgan a run. They came close in the fourth when Cieselski doubled, Goldberg singled, but Monday was nipped at home plate on a close play. The script was the same; the Raiders got their run in the 12th inning on a walk, error and single.

Linde was the super star. In the 30 innings against the Zollners he played all of them, 26 on the mound and four in the outfield. He happened to be in the outfield on Johnston's big drive. After his time in the service, Linde joined the Midland Dows and continue to be one of Zollner's most respected rivals.

The Pistons closed out the season when an appreciative crowd of 5,000 turned out to welcome them home. A team of Fort Wayne All-Stars nosed them out, 2-1, but it was only their eighth loss of the entire season.

The home games were still played at Municipal Beach and the crowd estimates still ranged from 4000 to 6000. A few lesser exhibitions were booked at Memorial Park. Hammer Field's Army All-Stars won the world championship twice in a row, but Zollner's had proved themselves to be the best civilian team in the land.

1945

The 1945 softball club came up with a special challenge. By the spring of the year, their professional brothers, the Zollner basketball team, had climbed the mountain first. In its second year in the National Basketball League the Pistons had won the league championship.

As with Fred Zollner's "let's do it right" philosophy, the Zollners kept fitting the pieces into their jigsaw puzzle that would take them to the championships. They had jumped into the big time so far so fast, but could not quite win the big one.

As early as 1942 they were considered the second best team in the land when Tulsa nosed them out. Midland upset them in the super-regional in 1943. They did not make it to the nationals in 1944 and it was Al Linde and Hammer Field that blocked their path.



Catcher-manager Bernie Kampschmidt puts the tag on a runner trying to score from third base.

The two-man pitching force of Leo Luken and Stan Corgan had not proved enough in 1944, so the Pistons added Clyde (Diz) Kirkendall, a seasoned pitcher from Findlay, Ohio, who had been a Fort Wayne foe on many occasions with the Toledo, Columbus and Cleveland teams. He was one of the best in the nation.

The true glue may have been added with the signing of Sam Lombardo, Ed Robitaille from Detroit and Harold (Mugsy) George from Columbus. The intraclub scrambling for jobs was as competitive as the games themselves.

It had to be a picnic for manager Harold Koch. Catching was Bernie Kampschmidt (also the team captain), backed up by Frank Parson. Hughie Johnston was a fixture at first base; Johnny Shaffer (nicknamed "Double Play") was at second; Neal Barille at shortstop, and Robitaille at third. Parson and Lombardo were battling for shortfield (it was still a ten-man game), while the outfield was a scramble between Chick Goldberg, Porky Slater, Monday Cieselski, Ron Burgette and Lou Bertsons.

The new combo opened against Chicago Match May 26th in Fort Wayne. Kirkendall got his first start with the Pistons. Leading 1-0 on John Shaffer's home run, Diz tired in the seventh inning, needed help from Luken, but the Zollners lost their opener, 2-1.

Counting the previous year's championship loss to Hammer Field, and the homecoming exhibition loss to the Fort Wayne All-Stars, the Pistons now had three losses in a row. After a surprise 2-0 loss to the Indianapolis Kingan Knights on June 8th, the Pistons started a 50-game winning streak with a 16-1 pasting of Midland.

Corgan had a shoulder injury, leaving most of the pitching duties to Luken and Kirkendall. The offense was blistering.

The best part of the winning streak was the inclusion of the National Industrial Tournament championship at Detroit over the July 4th week-end. Winning the industrial was an automatic qualifier for the world's championship, meaning the Pistons would not have to go through state and regional play to get another trip to Cleveland.

It took the Z's five games to get through to their first industrial tournament title. They beat Detroit Hudson Motors 7-0, then gave defending champion Detroit Briggs its first loss, 1-0, in the double elimination event.

The 1-0 win over Briggs was historical; it went 21 innings and lasted three hours and twenty-five minutes. Kirkendall went all the way for the win and the run was scored when Johnston singled, beat the throw to second on Lombardo's sacrifice. Johnston was forced at third but

Lombardo moved around on Slater's and Kampschmidt's grounders and a Detroit error.

They knocked out Rossville, Georgia, 3-0, and won the title with a 3-0 win over Briggs. Kirkendall again did the honors. Through the five tournament games, the Pistons did not have a run scored on them. After the industrial tournament, the Pistons' record stood at 25-2; Luken was 13-0; Kirkendall, 10-1; the injured Corgan, 2-1.

George had won the battle for shortfield, moving Lombardo to the outfield where he played the rest of his Piston career and wound up in the Softball Hall of Fame. Lombardo was a flamboyant player who, Bill Johnston said, could make an easy catch look hard. He might even make a catch at his shoelaces, take a tumble, and come up with his arms in the air and the ball in his glove.

He also perfected the "chop bunt", which made the ball bounce high enough in the air that when it came down, Sam was already at first base. Bill said Sam was the only player he saw use it.

Hughie Johnston remembered that the other players did not bunt much. "If I wanted to bat .500 I could bunt, but I never did care too much about statistics. I went for the long ball." From time to time, if the game called for it, Fred Zollner would remind Hughie that a short one would be a good idea.

Sam Lombardo liked to bunt because he cared about his batting average. "Sam was concerned about his average at all times," laughed Hughie.

Given that Fred Zollner acknowledged softball as his first sports love, the summer of 1945 had to be special to the sponsor.

One of the Midwest's formidable teams was Charlie Justice's Detroit Elks team. The all-black club was sponsored by Flint M and S Orange in 1945 and later came in under the banner of the Joe Louis Punchers.

The Pistons' winning streak had sparked bigger, enthusiastic crowds at Memorial Park and Municipal Beach. When Justice and his Detroit-Flint teams came to town in late July, the Pistons drew their biggest crowds of the season, 4,000 Saturday night and 8,000 Sunday night.

Luken beat the M and S team 4-2 Saturday night, and Kirkendall threw a no-hitter at them Sunday night. Chuck Percy, Detroit's other pitcher, lost to Luken but in the process struck out Hughie Johnston. Johnston took three strikes from Justice the next night. It was the first time this season that Fort Wayne's first baseman had struck out.



World's champion Zolher Pisons softball team.. 1945. Kneeling L to R: Bernie Kampschmidt, Ed Robitaille, Sam Lombardo and friend, owner-sponsor Fred Zolher. Monday Cieselski, Neal Barille, Chick Goldberg. Standing L to R: manager Harold Koch, Hughie Johnston, Harold George, Stan Corgan, Frank Parson, Leo Linken, Lou Bertiss, Porky Slater, Carl Bennett, John Shaffer, Ron Burgette, Clyde 'Diz' Kirkendall.

Another favorite rival of the Pistons were the Peoria Caterpillars. When the Pistons pasted them on successive nights, 4-0 and 6-0, Luken had won 19 straight and Kirkendall 17 straight, with only the opening loss to Chicago Match marring his record.

The Pistons were gearing up for the world's championship in Cleveland. They would be hearing from Charlie Justice some more, however.

The Z's were zipping through their schedule with ease and had broken the all-time consecutive win streak record of 46, established by the South Bend Bendix Brakes. With fifty in a row, Justice brought his powerful Flint team back to town and won a dramatic 1-0 nine-inning duel over Fort Wayne. The game was settled by a home run in the ninth, giving Kirkendall his second loss of the year. The Pistons had not been beaten from June 19th to August 29th. During the winning streak the Zollners outscored their opponents 346-35. The pitchers had thrown 37 shutouts and nine one-run ball games. Of the 464 innings played, 451 were scoreless for the foe. It undoubtedly was the best the world of softball had ever seen. It set the stage for a dramatic entry into the world's championship, the same double elimination affair that had slipped out of Fort Wayne's grasp two of the last three times.

The Pistons (now nicknamed The Big Z's in the Cleveland sports columns) marched through their first five tournament games: Phelps Dodge, 5-0; Flint, 3-2; Washington Kavakas, 3-0; Toronto Tip Top Tailors, 4-0; and Tacoma, Washington, 7-3.

Meanwhile, Flint (and Justice) had worked its way back up through the loser's bracket to the finals. Charlie played the ghost of Al Linde to Fort Wayne as Flint won the game, 1-0, Justice scoring the winning run.

With one loss for each team and the title on the line, Luken came on to pitch and beat Flint, 1-0, giving the Zollners their first world's championship. The winning run came in the fourth inning when sparkplug Barille singled, moved to second on Robitaille's grounder and scored on Chick Goldberg's single.

It was Luken's 35th win of the season without a loss. The Z's wound up the season with only four losses: to Chicago Match, the Indianapolis Kingans, and twice to Charlie Justice and Flint. Hughie Johnston was named the most valuable player of the 1945 world's tournament.

During the season, the Pistons won fifty consecutive games. There were 37 shutouts and nine one-run games. The Zollner pitchers

(Luken, Kirkendall and Corgan) threw 451 scoreless innings out of a total of 464 innings played.

Fred Zollner now had two world championship teams. His ownership of the National Basketball League franchise and his softball sweep perked up interest among other corporations for industrial competition. Realizing the morale-building such sponsorships created during the war years, other companies saw the value to their employees and communities, and started to follow suit.

Six teams met in Fort Wayne to organize the National Softball League, one of the Zollner-Bennett visions. Besides the Pistons, the teams entered were the Midland Dow Chemicals, Detroit Briggs, Cleveland Allmens, Columbus Ferguson Auditors and Chicago Match.

League games would be scheduled on weekends, a double-header on Saturday night and a nine-inning game on Sunday, giving a 30-game schedule. The League would be affiliated with, and abide by the rules of, the Amateur Softball Association.

The Commissioner was former umpire Charles F. Jensen. Bennett was the first league president and W. E. Landis of Detroit was the treasurer.

1945 was a very good year for Fred Zollner. Production at Zollner Machine Works was booming; some four million pistons were rolling off the assembly line; three Army-Navy "E's" were flying from the Beuter Road plant flagpole for excellence in production for World War II; the pro basketball team and amateur softball team were the best in the world and the Zollners were a proud ingredient in Fort Wayne's industrial climate.

1946

The game of softball was changing. In 1946, the Amateur Softball Association's rule-makers opted to make the game a nine-man instead of ten-man sport. The shortfielder was eliminated in an effort to get more offense into the game.

There had been too many pitchers' duels and not enough slugfests. But no-hitters held less interest than home runs. The pitcher's box had been lengthened from 35 feet to 40 feet, then to 43 feet.

Whereas it had started out as a fun-to-play depression-oriented sport, softball now was arousing fan interest and its principals wanted it to be fun to watch as well as to play.

By its record in the incredible 1945 season (72-4), Fort Wayne had become the showcase team of national softball. But even climbing to the top of the mountain was not enough for Fred Zollner's pursuit of perfection.

There were several players returning from service as the war wound down. There were others on the team who had served their own Piston-player tour of duty and it may have been surprising to see the number of changes that started the 1946 campaign.

The ASA was tightening its war-loosened eligibility requirements. That eliminated Monday Cieselski, who was playing on a partial basis but had a South Bend residence. Stan Corgan, one of the best in the game when he started out with South Bend, was sore-armed most of 1945, and was released.

Frank Parson, Lou Bertso, Porky Slater and Ron Burgette returned to their plant jobs at Zollner Machine Works and all, except Bertso, spent the rest of their working lives there.

But coming back from their time with Uncle Sam were Jim Ramage, Billy Johnston, Bob Baker and Curly Armstrong. To make up for Corgan's departure, Big Bill West was signed. He was from the Kentucky area that spawned Kampschmidt, Luken and Ramage, and quickly became one of the Zollner stars.

There has always been debate about who has been softball's fastest pitcher and West's name is among the contenders. He was one of the earliest Zollners to be inducted into Softball's Hall of Fame.

It seemed to be an inconsistent number of changes for a team that had just reached the top. But it worked.

With the challenge of the new National Softball League ahead, and defense of their world's championship, Zollner thought they should be as well conditioned as possible. Besides, softball enthusiasts wanted to see softball's new "dream team."

So a spring training trip of ten games was booked into the Phoenix, Arizona, area. It was perhaps the first spring training trip for any team in softball history. Phoenix was a softball hotbed and had just built a \$60,000 softball park.

The Pistons opened with a 15-0 win over a Scottsdale, Arizona, club, and local sports writers dubbed them "The Gas House Gang." They

roared through ten straight wins, Kirkendall and Luken winning four each, and newcomer West, two.

They drew 35,000 fans for the exhibition. Ramage hit the first home run out of the park in the new arena. It was another example of "first class Fred" and his visions of making softball a major league sport. The Pistons had suddenly become "notorious" in their own sport.

It was a far cry from the rain-hampered spring of 1945 when the Pistons did not seem quite ready and dropped their season opener to Chicago Match. But Fred Zollner wanted to give his team a jump start into the National Softball League, which at the opening of the season had added two other clubs — the Indianapolis Kingans and the South Bend Thomases.

One unexpected loss to the 1946 team was critical. Ed Robitaille, the premier third baseman in the game, was diagnosed by the team physician with a heart condition that took him out for the entire season. Robey was a role-model ball player. He had gone through the entire 1945 season with only two errors at the hot corner. He seemed particularly effective at the plate in clutch situations. He had forfeited a budding career in Detroit baseball for the security of employment-safe softball. Hughie Johnston, who had known him since they were sandlot players, described Ed as "one of the happiest guys to play ball with I ever knew. What a pair of hands he had. No balls ever got by him."

Robitaille remained on the team and was stationed at third base, except it was in the coaches' box. The shuffling of the roster with returning service-men and departing veterans left the Zollners with a hard-core fifteen players on the squad.

After the ten-game sweep through Phoenix the Z's returned to Fort Wayne to face the new challenge of the National Softball League. The winning streak was extended to nineteen games, six of which were counters in the NSL, before they were upset by Newport, Kentucky, 1-0. This happened at Fort Wayne's Dwenger Park. The Pistons still had to split their home schedule at city parks.

A few days earlier when the Cincinnati Emmerts were beaten, the game was played at Memorial Park (8-0) before the largest crowd ever at that park. The Phoenix training trip and a continuation of the Pistons' winning ways had stirred a lot of fan interest.

Arch rival Charlie Justice was the next to pop the Zollner bubble. He beat them 2-0 with his Flint M and S Orange team, inflicting the second loss of the season. But in six games with Flint, Fort Wayne won the other five.



Zollner Piston softball team, 1946. Front row L to R: John Shaffer, Neal Barille, Sam Lombardo, Hughie Johnston. Second row L to R: Jim Ramage, sponsor Fred Zollner, batboy Bob Foreman, Bernie Kampschmidt, Carly Armstrong. Third row L to R: Chick Goldberg, Harold George, Ed Robitaille, Gene Nickolin. Top row L to R: Bob Baker, Leo Luken, Bill West, Diz Kirkendall, Billy Johnston, Carl Bennett.

In fourteen games in the 1944 season, his 35 games in 1945 and the first four games of 1946, Leo Luken had continued a brilliant fifty-three-game winning streak. It was unprecedented. Then, in a NSL Fourth of July doubleheader at Detroit, Briggs finally snapped the streak. Up until the 2-1 loss in the second half of the twin bill the Pistons had won fourteen in a row in league play. Their record for the season at this point was 38-3.

Fort Wayne clinched the NSL championship at Midland. Their final 37-5 record was four games ahead of Briggs. Detroit wound up beating the Z's three times in league play. Midland and South Bend inflicted the other defeats.

In preparing the team for its world championship title defense Bennett scheduled an exhibition tour through the East. Also coming up was a "World Series" playoff with the American Softball League champions, Buffalo Bell Aircraft.

The Fort Wayne team's fame had spread to Toronto, where they were challenged by the Tip Top Tailors in a charity doubleheader at the Canadian National Exhibition. Before 16,297 paid admissions, the Pistons helped raise more than \$12,000 for the building fund of Sick Children's Hospital and whipped the Tip Top Tailors, 5-1 and 5-0. The crowd reportedly was the largest in softball history to watch a game.

The successful Eastern exhibition swing took the Z's to Hamilton (Ontario), Cleveland, Erie, Buffalo and Pittsburgh for lopsided wins, except for a 1-0 thriller at Hamilton and a rained out 0-0 tie.

The world's championship at Cleveland was a cakewalk for the Big Z's. They marched through six straight games to the championship, outscoring their competition 25-1 in the process. Their heavy-artillery offense pounded forty-one hits (an average of one an inning) while stopping the opponents at twelve. The only run scored against them was unearned.

The roster for the 1946 world champions: John Shaffer, Neal Barille, Sam Lombardo, Hughie Johnston, Jim Ramage, Bernie Kampschmidt, Curly Armstrong, Chick Goldberg, Harold George, Ed Robitaille, Gene Nickolin, Bob Baker, Leo Luken, Bill West, Diz Kirkendall, Billy Johnston and coach Carl Bennett.

In a mid-season change, Harold Koch, who had been manager, gave up the skipper role to Kampschmidt because of the extensive travel schedule now required by the world champs. Koch, one of the originals in the softball program, finished out his working career at Zollner Machine Works.

After winning at Cleveland, the Pistons came home for successive double-headers against the American League champs and demolished them in four straight games: 4-0, 9-1, 6-0 and 4-0. Luken won two of the games; West and Kirkendall one each. Kirkendall's was a no-hitter.

The Pistons had won 93 games, their highest winning total ever, and lost just seven.

What next? Most wins, first National Softball League Championship, first "World Series," second straight world's ASA title, first ever two-week spring training trip. What next? Ground was broken during the season for the country's most advanced softball stadium. Zollner Stadium, on North Anthony Boulevard in Fort Wayne, was being constructed and would be ready for play by the spring of 1947.

The players had good reason to look forward to the advanced facilities at the new stadium. At Municipal Beach, there were no lockers or showers. The team dressed at home and then returned there to clean up. The idea of having first-class facilities was exciting.

Several players were named to the all-NSL All-Star team: Hughie and Billy Johnston, Jim Ramage, Sam Lombardo, Bernie Kampschmidt, Bill West and Neal Barille.

1947

It started to look like one-upmanship. The pro basketballers answered the softballers' second straight world's title with their third straight victory in the world's pro tournament in Chicago, a feat never accomplished before. The softballers had their work cut out for them. Zollner and Bennett made sure they did not flinch.

Already armed with the best pitching corps ever assembled, the Pistons picked up Elmer ("Farmer") Rohrs, an apple-cheeked fireballer from neighboring Hamler, Ohio. As usual, they had spotted him before. He had come close to beating them when he hurled for the Columbus Ferguson Auditors and Napoleon, Ohio, Seven-Ups.

Rohrs had credentials like Bob Feller's in baseball. Born on a farm, he had been coached by his dad, who hung a tire in an apple tree. Elmer practiced controlling where the ball went, and developed one of the fastest slingshots in the history of the game. Bernie Kampschmidt said, "He was wild enough to make him a better pitcher," and Hughie Johnston called him, "Wilder than blazes." If you had too much control, the pitching

became predictable and the other team knew what you would do next. His signing with the Zollners was his first step toward the Softball Hall of Fame, into which he was inducted in 1992.

The other players loved to play tricks on Elmer, and started with his arrival on the team. They took his shaving cream and wrote 'Hi, Elmer' on his hotel bed.

The team added infield insurance with Bill Hilgefert from the Covington area. The Pistons had scouted him when they kept jousting with the Newport Sixth Ward Boosters.

Sore-armed Stan Corgan was trying a comeback so that gave the Pistons a front wall of pitching from Leo Luken, Diz Kirkendall, Bill West, Corgan and Rohrs. No other team had ever been more strong-armed.

The pitchers each had their characteristics, too. Bill West was a fast ball type of pitcher, low down, while Rohrs' used a 'rise ball' which came up under the chin of the batter.

The parade of Detroit stars to Fort Wayne continued as the Pistons signed smooth-swinging Ernie Flowers, who eventually would set a Piston season home run record. Hughie Johnston said Flowers had "a good wrist action. When he would nail the ball, it was gone, a good long ball."

Gene Nickolin was released, Johnny Shaffer signed to work and play for Midland, and Harold George went back to the Machine Works and played for the reserve club.

Robitaille decided it was more fun to play than watch and resumed his place at third base, moving Ramage to shortstop. In the speed game of softball, it was a big advantage to be a step closer to first base and the Zollners loaded up on left handers.

Even Billy Johnston, a natural right hander, switched to the port-side at the plate and became one of the game's best drag bunt artists. Of the eight regulars, only Kampschmidt, Ramage and Curly Armstrong batted right-handed. There were few left-handed pitchers. Clyde (Lefty) Dexter, Midland's ace, was one of the notable exceptions, so this was deemed an extra advantage for Fort Wayne's potent offense.

As spring training in Phoenix approached, the Zollners prepared another historic chapter in Fort Wayne's sports book, the opening of Fred Zollner's softball palace, Zollner Stadium.

Spring training was a six-game swing through Rock Island, Illinois, Libertyville and Aurora. It limbered up the arms and loosened the muscles, and the Pistons returned to Fort Wayne for the stadium opening

on Memorial Day with successive league double-headers against Midland and Columbus.

It was around this time that the team switched from travelling by bus. It had always been a problem. As Bernie Kampschmidt explained, there were three kinds of guys on the team. One group arrived early for the bus, another came on time and there were always those who were late. It was easier to travel by car. The cars could stop and go as the groups liked. The cigar smokers would not bother those who did not care for cigars. The team stuck with automobile travel for the rest of its existence, except when it had the luxury of riding on Fred Zollner's plane.

Bill Johnston later said that "travelling was the worst part of the job."

Bill West had to go eight innings to win the opener, 1-0. Sam Lombardo had the honor of scoring the first run, driven in by a Curly Armstrong double. West fanned seventeen. The losing pitcher was Linde. The Pistons unwound in the second game, beating Dexter 5-2. West got credit for his second win of the night after relieving Leo Luken and Diz Kirkendall.

The Pistons made it a perfect weekend. Kirkendall beat Columbus, 2-1, the next night, and Elmer Rohrs made his Fort Wayne debut throwing a no-hitter at his old teammates in a 10-0 romp. Hughie Johnston had the honor of hitting the first home run in the new stadium — a 260-foot blast — and enjoyed a heavy hitting night with another pair of triples.

All 2804 seats in the permanent stands were filled while the crowd overflowed into the bleachers down left and right field. Fireworks and an appearance by radio celebrity, Dr. I. Q., helped the celebration

A business detail of the new stadium showed Fred Zollner at his best.

Every year, the Zollner firm sponsored a high-school age softball team, called the Zollner Piston Juniors. The year the stadium opened, the team was made up of boys from Central Catholic High School. They had put together their own team, then gone out to the piston plant to ask for sponsorship.

The boys on the junior team were offered jobs as vendors in the stands at the new stadium. They earned a commission of 10-15 cents for each dollar of peanuts or soft drinks sold.

Don Mauck remembered that it was a dream job for an adolescent. They played their own games, spent most days on the golf course and the



World's champion Zolner Piston softball, 1947. Front row L to R: Hugh Johnston, catcher-manager Bernie Kampsschmidt, sponsor Fred Zolner, Neal Barille. Middle row L to R: Chick Goldberg, Ernie Flowers, Sam Lombardo, Jim Ramage, Ed Robitaille, Elmer Rohrs. Top row L to R: Billy Johnston, Bill Hølgefort, Stan Corgan, Bill West, Leo Lutken, Carl Bennett, Diz Kirkendall.

evenings in the bleachers selling peanuts and watching the game. "It was good money, too," he said.

In the second season, attendees at the games had the chance to soften the hard seats by renting pads. The pads rented for sixty-five cents, but the boys earned the same commission for them. The pads were popular and the boys' earnings soared.

But not for long. "They quickly cut back our commissions," said Mauck, "We were earning too much!"

The Pistons settled down to the business of scrapping for the National Softball League championship. One of the earlier upsets in the season was losing a Zollner Stadium double-header to Toledo Buddies Lunch. Virgil Gladioux had build the Toledo Sports Arena to house his Toledo Jeeps in the National Basketball League and Fort Wayne enticed him to a softball sponsorship.

One of the Toledo's pitchers, Elmer MacDonald, beat the Pistons in one of those games, which immediately caught the eye of Zollner. MacDonald would later be pitching for Fort Wayne, but the double loss to Toledo was an early blow to the Pistons' prestige in their new ball park.

Detroit's celebrated boxer, Joe Louis, picked up the sponsorship of Charlie Justice's Flint team and the team became the Joe Louis Punchers, advertising a soft drink bearing the heavyweight champ's name. Most sports writers still simply called the team Punchers.

Flint was not in the NSL, but was always an attractive exhibiton date. The Pistons went to Flint early on and were punched out, 6-1. The loss cracked Bill West's 38-game winning streak, which was going into its second season.

The Pistons won the second game 5-2 but it set the stage for a mid-July shoot-out at Zollner Stadium. Louis came along with his team and more than 7500 fans poured into the two-night stand, with the Pistons winning both times, 3-1 and 2-1. South Bend and Columbus hung single losses on the Pistons, and at midseason they had won thirty-three and lost five.

1947 was developing into a significant historical year, not only for the Pistons but for softball. The Pistons, with their own playing facility, were playing the most ambitious schedule of any team in history. In August they had already won sixty-five games and lost just eight. Toledo had beaten them three times, all in league play, but the Z's had a comfortable lead in the NSL. Cleveland and Midland had slipped in one win each against them, although the Z's were impregnable with all others.

But the Pistons were like the Yankees, the old Celtics — the team everyone wanted to beat. This was the spirit when they went back to Cleveland looking for their third straight, and unprecedented, championship.

To settle the Toledo score, after splitting with them in six league games, they took on the Buddies in an exhibition twin bill in which Kirkendall no-hit them and Rohr had a two-hit shutout to beat their stars Fritz Sosko and MacDonald. But big, slim Mac had passed his "physical" and would soon be in a Zollner uniform.

It was in a "break-up-the-Pistons" atmosphere that Fort Wayne went into its title defense. The Pistons opened with a 5-1 win over the host Cleveland Turners, who protested the eligibility of center fielder Curly Armstrong, because of his professional status in basketball. In a provincial, home-town ruling, the committee (afraid to disqualify their biggest attraction, Fort Wayne) ruled Armstrong ineligible and the game was replayed the next morning. Jim Ramage, who homered in the first game, hit one again and the Pistons breezed through 2-0.

Armstrong had played all season, eligible in all the ASA games. A solid ruling would have been forfeiture of all Pistons' wins, which were more than one hundred by this time. After the tournament Armstrong was made eligible to finish out the National Softball League, still in the ASA jurisdiction!

But the Pistons thought it was a cheap shot. It made the Zollners look stronger, the Amateur Softball Association weaker.

The Zollners came back the same night to pluck New York's Grumman Aircraft, 2-0, and took the Washington Kavakos next, 6-1. Hughie Johnston's three-run homer settled Hanford, California, in the winner's bracket finals.

Asked why he was so good, Hughie Johnston said, "I played hard. I had a good eye. I didn't strike out too many times — maybe ten times in a season, and then because I was going for a big one." He said the best players were tough and were always thinking, putting the stress on "thinking all the time."

Fred Zollner once asked Hughie, "Why do you always tag the guys so hard?" Hughie said he had once tagged a player in the usual way, only to have the umpire call him safe. "I made up my mind then," Hughie says, "If the umpire doesn't see it, he's going to hear it."

West threw a no-hitter in the championship game where the Z's beat the respected Russ Johnson and the Toronto Tip Tops for their third straight world's title.



Manager Bernie Kampschmidt and team owner Fred Zollner display the World's Championship trophy at Cleveland, Ohio.

Piqued by the spineless Armstrong decision, combined with a hope for organizing a solid major softball league, Fred Zollner announced the next day that the Pistons were withdrawing from ASA world competition to concentrate on building the National Softball League.

The team would remain a member of, and observe all the rules of, the ASA, but would not compete in the tournament competition. At the rate they were playing, their domination could have continued for several years with their current players, and with Zollner's constant rebuilding and replenishing. The team that had been dubbed in 1946 by Cleveland sportswriters as the "most perfect" seemed to be even more perfect now.

They continued through the National Softball League championships, beating Western Division champion Aurora in four straight. They then beat the American League champion Rochester Rossers in four of six for their second straight world series crown.

For the season, the Pistons won a record 113 games and lost 19. The big three of the five-man pitching brigade — West, Kirkendall, and Rohrs — each won twenty-eight games. Luken was 17-4 with Corgan 12-3. West lost six, Kirkendall four, and Rohrs two.

The championship roster was: Hughie Johnston, manager Bernie Kampschmidt, Neal Barille, Curly Armstrong, Chick Goldberg, Ernie Flowers, Sam Lombardo, Jim Ramage, Ed Robitaille, Elmer Rohrs, Billy Johnston, Bill Hilgefert, Stan Corgan, Bill West, Leo Luken, Carl Bennett and Diz Kirkendall.

Three Wins . . . and Out!

Abdicating their throne as the world's best softball team in 1947 was no snap decision for the Zollners.

Inconsistencies with the ruling ASA body had troubled the Pistons, among others, through their seven years of active tournament competition. Barring Curly Armstrong from further tournament play after winning the first game in the world's was merely the final straw.

The wishy-washy Cleveland decision caused the Pistons to come back and replay their Friday night win on a Sunday morning, without Armstrong. Ironically it was Armstrong's home run a year earlier that had been a clincher for the Pistons' second title. The Armstrong ruling was akin to Michael Jordan being ruled a pro golfer because he was a pro basketball star with the Chicago Bulls.

Pro basketballers Bobby McDermott and Paul Birch had been on the Piston softball club, under ASA sanction. Buddy Jeannette, another cage star, played with the Zollner reserve club when it competed for the state championship.

Special exemptions were provided for Chick Goldberg, Monday Ciesielski, and Ed Cieslik to live in South Bend and play games for the Zollners a couple of years before. Immediately after the tournament, Armstrong played in the National Softball League playoffs against the western division champs from Aurora, all under ASA sanction.

It was important for the Pistons to maintain their ASA status because they needed a schedule. Neither they nor any of the National or American Softball League clubs wanted to become outlaws. The intent, through a series of meetings during the 1947 ASA tournament, was to have a "super league of softball" and eventually work into a full-time schedule.

There were other rumblings. Prior to the 1946 tournament, Goldberg and Ciesielski had been ruled ineligible. Zollners wielded a powerful influence on the ASA, and by opening night, Goldberg and Ciesielski were in the starting lineup.

The Pistons were powerful enough that they had created a "beat-the-Yankees" aura around the tournament. The September 14, 1946, *Journal Gazette* said regarding Armstrong, "The action of the ASA caused some surprise and not a little resentment among officials of the Zollner club.... The procedure in the Armstrong case and its management of the tournament here had the Zollner management thoroughly displeased and there were hints of further developments and a possible break in the relationship.

"It was claimed that this year's tournament is a weak one because of disbarment of some of the leading teams and the Zollner officials felt further that the ASA went out of its way to make trouble for the champions."

Ben Tenny, the *News Sentinel* sports editor travelling with the club in Cleveland, had reported that the tournament was like an "ASA benefit." His story said it cost Zollner \$3000 (which was a low estimate) to make the trip and the team was reimbursed only \$150.

Inclement weather extended the tournament. The umpires were unpaid for the extra days and a Puerto Rican entry had to wire home for money to finish out their schedule.

That prompted the decision to concentrate on building up the National Softball League. The National and American leagues agreed to drop out of tournament play, but to stay within the ASA parameters.

The day after Bill West no-hit Toronto, 4-0, for the third title, Fred Zollner announced, "Our relations with the ASA have been very fine, but we feel that it will be mutually beneficial for our leagues and for the ASA for our retirement from ASA tournaments. We have won the championship three straight times now and by our retirement it will leave the tournament wide open for other leading softball clubs.

"The tournament, as it is set up, does not give the chance for the majority of fine softball teams to be represented. For instance, in the Midwest there are nine or ten outstanding softball clubs but only one of these is qualified to participate in the Cleveland tournament. We feel that the strength in the softball world is found in the midwestern and eastern cities which are represented in the National and American leagues.

"The ASA tournaments come at a time when these teams should be giving their undivided attention to their respective final positions in their league races. It's a diversion and an attention which is not in the best interest of the National and American League races.

"Because of our definite belief in the increasing strength of the National and American leagues, we deem it advisable to retire from ASA tournaments as thrice world champions.

"It is our earnest desire to help develop the National and American Softball leagues as the premier softball competition of the country and we cannot do this by dual participation in our league schedule and the hope of competing in the ASA tournaments." Thus closed the memorable ASA chapter for the world's greatest softball team. No team had ever won three in a row. In six years (1942-47), they had won three, been beaten by the champs (Tulsa in 1942, Hammer Field in 1944) and missed out in the super-regionals in 1943. No other team had gone so far so fast.

1948

If Fred Zollner were a poker player, he might have picked up his cards for the 1948 season, choose to discard one and say, "I'll play these."

The discard was Stan Corgan, one of the game's historical greats when he started out in South Bend. He had tried to come back after recovering from a sore arm but was comparatively ineffective with a 12-3

mark in 1947. He found work with the Waukegan Pilots in the Western Division of the fledgling National Softball League.

Zollner had good reasons for sticking with last year's lineup. The 1947 club had just won its third world championship. They dominated the NSL in the regular season and beat the American League in the playoffs.

Six of their players — Bernie Kampschmidt, Hughie Johnston, Jim Ramage, Sam Lombardo, Bill West and Elmer Rohrs — had made the League All-Star Team. Johnston was the league's most valuable player, edging out Kampschmidt by one vote in the All-Star balloting. Other All-Stars in 1947 were Midland's Johnny Shaffer (a former Piston), Cleveland's Joe Costello, Detroit's Steve Sage, Midland's Pat Walsh and Toledo pitcher Elmer MacDonald.

While in Cleveland at the World's, three of the Z's had been invited to a major league baseball tryout by manager Lou Boudreau of the Cleveland Indians. They were the Johnston brothers, Hughie and Billy, along with shortstop Jim Ramage. Their workouts were impressive enough that they were offered contracts. Unfortunately, they would have to prove themselves in the minors and it was a little late in their careers to try that approach.

Earlier on, Kampschmidt had a chance in the Cincinnati Reds program. He preferred softball. Softball was a door opener to permanent employment and, frankly, there was quite a bit more money in softball than in minor league baseball.

So the players were complacent as they faced the most ambitious league schedule ever tried in major softball. They faced a trying seventy-game schedule in the Eastern Division against arch-rival Midland, Detroit (under the E and B banner), Cleveland, Flint, Toledo, Ann Arbor, and South Bend. Eight others were in the Western Division. The divisional champs would play for the league title and meet the American League champs for the "world series."

The team included: Kampschmidt, Barille, Ramage, H. Johnston, B. Johnston, Flowers, Goldberg, Hilgefert, Robitaille, Lombardo, and four pitchers, Rohrs, Luken, Kirkendall, and West. Rohrs had passed his freshman test leading the NSL with ten wins and one loss.

It was Bernie Kampschmidt's job to collect the appearance money from the other teams on road trips. This was meant to cover the expenses. Anything left over was given to Fred Zollner, but his expenses were always more than he received.

The sums were large, perhaps \$400 a time, and Bernie was concerned that the money be kept safe. He used to put it in his wallet, and then stuff it all in his pillow-case.

Naturally, the other players knew he did this, so once when he was in the shower, they took his wallet and filled it with shaving cream. When he took out the wallet to pay the team's hotel bill, there it was.

The Pistons were in their prime. They had just won a record 113 games and felt strong enough that the fourteen-man roster would carry them through.

An estimated 90,000 fans had helped celebrate the 1947 inaugural season at Zollner Stadium. Recognizing that Carl Bennett needed a bigger staff to promote the stadium, softball, and the dream of major league status, Zollner called Rodger Nelson at the office of the National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues in Columbus to invite him to have an interview with Bennett to handle publicity and promotion for the budding ventures.

Nelson had a sportswriting background, most recently at the *Journal-Gazette*. He joined the Zollner staff in August, 1947. He brought with him baseball's tried and true "Knot Hole Gang" promotion, which fit the Zollner pattern. It would stimulate interest among the youngsters, increase attendance, teach the game and even sell some hot dogs and popcorn along the way. It created a lot of new, young Zollner Piston fans in Fort Wayne and northeastern Indiana.

Zollner and Bennett attacked the Knot Hole Gang program vigorously. All youngsters, first through eighth grades, were invited to sign up. Their membership cards would give them free admission to the bleachers on designated Knot Hole Nights with door prizes and a grand prize drawing at the end of the season. The response was overwhelming with 9000 signing up before the start of the season.

Bill Johnston said that the timing of the program was important. Fort Wayne was bustling, everyone was home from the war and had a job. "You could walk downtown and speak to every business man you saw. You knew everybody," he said. People in the city knew one another, and the Pistons were an important element of urban life here.

Getting ready for the 1948 season was a typical seven-game swing through the western end of the National League with stops at Hammond, Iowa City, Rock Island, Aurora and Milwaukee. The only missing player besides the released Corgan was Curly Armstrong, whose controversial ban in the world's tournament helped the Pistons decide to drop out of the ASA championship runs.

ROG IS ASSISTANT
ATHLETIC DIRECTOR OF
THE ZOLLNER
PISTONS!

Rodger
NELSON

PUBLICITY
DIRECTOR
FOR NATIONAL
INDUSTRIAL
FASTBALL LEAGUE

— BEEN WITH THE
PISTONS SINCE 1947 EXCEPT FOR BRIEF
HITCH IN COLUMBUS —

— HE WAS SPORTS
EDITOR FOR THE
TUCSON DAILY CITIZEN AND
OHIO STATE JOURNAL AT
COLUMBUS —

— ALSO WAS SPORTS WRITER
FOR JOURNAL-GAZETTE!

DEAD-
LINE!

Bob
Zoller

Armstrong suffered a broken finger during National Basketball League play and was having corrective surgery. Kampschmidt was the heavy hitter during the seven-game swing with all four pitchers getting unbeaten workouts. However, the long ball seemed to be missing as only Ramage, Robitaille and Goldberg had homers.

The league opener was at Toledo. Elmer MacDonald, of Buddy Lunch, forced the Z's into 10 innings before wild-pitching Billy Johnston home and losing 1-0. It was Fort Wayne's eighth straight win.

The Z's opened at home with a Memorial Day double-header. That Saturday night against Detroit was the first Knot Hole Gang Night and Zollner Stadium overflowed. Bill West and Diz Kirkendall beat the E and B's 4-0 and 5-2. Sunday's 3-2 win was followed by a huge fireworks display.

A record crowd of 7000 turned out at Midland the next weekend as Clyde (Lefty) Dexter snapped Fort Wayne's 11-game winning streak, 4-3. The revitalized Dow Chemicals rattled eight hits off West, Rohrs and Kirkendall.

The Pistons were doing their best to sell softball. Prior to the Ann Arbor game in June, the players offered a clinic to softball youngsters, players and enthusiasts. National League Commissioner Charlie Jensen came in to discuss rules and league competition as Piston players told and showed the 1,000 "students" how the best players in the game play it. The guests were invited to stay over to watch the teachers best Ann Arbor, 1-0. Ann Arbor could not produce a run during the three-game stand, as they lost the next double-header, 8-0 and 1-0. West, Luken and Kirkendall got the shutouts.

The other teams were building up to Zollner's level in league play. Joe Costello's hitting helped Cleveland to a win over the Z's, 3-2 in Cleveland and later Ken Ramsdell, Toledo's other pitcher, gave Fort Wayne its first loss (2-1) in Zollner Stadium in 1948.

The club did its clowning and relaxing in exhibition trips, trying to build area softball interest by playing in neighboring towns — Marion, Harlan, Kendallville, Defiance, and Napoleon. They greatly overmatched these local all-star teams and would rotate their own players around, demonstrating their all-around talents and entertainment skills.

Pitchers would switch to outfield or infield positions while Kampschmidt, Ramage or Flowers would take turns on the mound, but never to the endangerment of losing a game. On several occasions the outfielders would come in and sit around the pitcher's box and watch the pitchers strike out the side.

The demanding league schedule took its mid-season toll of the South Bend and Ann Arbor entries and they dropped from competition. The results of their games played were nullified. The Pistons had seven of their wins erased and it temporarily gave Midland a slight lead in the standings on the percentage of games played.

Overall for the season the Pistons won 39 of the 41 exhibitions played and this competition included some of the tough western division clubs. As league competition stiffened, the Pistons started to beef up their lineup. Johnny Palcheff, a sweet-swinging, all-around player from St. Louis, tried out and made the team. He joined the club in August and was available on a part-time basis as he was winding up his studies at St. Louis' Washington University. Palcheff could play all positions, even catcher, where Kampschmidt needed more relief.

When South Bend threw in the towel, the Pistons also signed Big Ike Bierwagen for part-time duty. He had been a South Bend pitching whiz since Bendix days. After the South Bend and Ann Arbor dropouts, the NSL schedule was mended and the six remaining teams played out the 70-game schedule. The only schedule that seemed off was the Pistons, in performance.

For awhile Midland gave them a scare in the standings but at the final count, Fort Wayne's record was 56-14, ten games ahead of the Dows.

Late in the campaign they had lost a home double-header to Flint's Punchers plus a twin stadium loss to Midland.

The Z's had one winning streak of 23 games, but moved into the NSL playoffs cautiously. While Midland played Cleveland, Fort Wayne took on third place Flint. Charlie Justice and company gave them a tussle.

Flint forced the Pistons to the five-game limit and Big Bill West was the winner in the three games for Fort Wayne. West won 5-0. Justice came back with a 1-0 victory for the Punchers. Chick Goldberg's bat was a big factor as West won 3-0 in Flint. In the fourth game, the Punchers raked four Fort Wayne pitchers for a score of 7-1. West finally beat them 1-0 in the decider. Goldberg again drove in the winner.

Midland had dusted off Cleveland. In the first game of the Easter division finals, they fell 1-0 on Luken's no-hitter. But the Chemicals came back to take the second game at Fort Wayne and handed Rohrs and Kirkendall a 3-0 loss. The series moved to Midland and the Dows swamped the Z's 8-3, scoring as many runs as any team had ever scored against Fort Wayne. West, Luken and Kirkendall were the pitchers.

Midland then won the playoff championship, 3-1. Rohrs and West could not stop them. Midland went on to beat Racine of the Western



Beautiful Zolner Stadium, a ballpark specifically designed for softball. It opened in 1947 on North Anthony Boulevard, Fort Wayne.

half for the NSL championship and won the "world series" against the American champs.

It was Midland's first full-blown crown and it was a reminder of the 1943 ASA super-regionals when they stopped Fort Wayne from qualifying for the world tournament. The Pistons' final figure was 99-21.

It was the most losses for a Piston team in any season. The hitting and pitching were both off. However West was chosen the league's most valuable player; Kampschmidt, Hughie, Ramage, Robitaille and Lombardo made the all-star team with West. Midland's pair, Lefty Dexter and Al Linde, were the all-star pitchers with West. Midland's Johnny Shaffer, Flint's Floyd Bates and Caldonia Phelps were the others named All-Stars.

The Z's 1948 roster included: Jim Ramage, Ernie Flowers, Sam Lombardo, Hugh Johnston, manager Bernie Kampschmidt, Chick Goldberg, Neal Barille, Ed Robitaille, Bill West, John Palcheff, Bill Johnston, Bill Hilgefert, Ike Bierwagen, Diz Kirkendall, Leo Luken, Elmer Rohrs.

The pitching record was: Luken 16-2; Rohrs, 22-7; Kirkendall, 21-4; West, 34-7; Bierwagen, 6-1.

Before the next season, Kirkendall left the organization. He continued to pitch throughout Michigan, Ohio and even did a spell in Windsor, Ontario. He died in 1957 at the age of 42, and was elected to the Softball Hall of Fame in 1959. Bill Johnston rated him among the top ten pitchers in fastball history.

Diz was a quiet man who did not socialize too much with the other players. He let his record, which included 108 scoreless innings while he was pitching in Cincinnati, speak for him. Hughie Johnston remembers one occasion when he did join in, to his regret.

The players had some time off in Peoria and decided to go to a gambling joint. "We were looking for something extra to do, and everything was legal in Illinois," Hughie explains. They decided to shoot craps. Diz was known to carry "a bunch of money tucked away in his wallet." Hughie later decided the game was fixed in favour of the house. "We got taken," he said, "Diz's money was all gone. It was unusual, \$40 or \$50, back then, that was a lotta dough. I never caught him doing that again."

1949

In 1948, Lowell Thomas wrote, "As 5,000 rabid enthusiasts will tell you, there's nothing sissy about this game. Here are three reasons for its popularity: pitchers are fast, sliding is rough and the ball is hard."

Thomas went on to say that nothing about softball was soft. It did everything baseball did, plus speed and more speed.

Perhaps Thomas was the inspiration for changing the National Softball League name to the National Fastball League.

That is what the Zollner's message had been when they abdicated their ASA world's championship after the 1947 tournament. The Pistons and their peers were playing the fastest of all other softball. Thus the name changed to 'fastball' for the 1949 season. Bernie Kampschmidt remembered that it was Carl Bennett who suggested the name change at a meeting of team owners.

The Pistons' mission in 1949 was twofold: to get back the championship they had lost to Midland in the 1948 playoffs and to sell the game to the fans and more players. The mere fact of Fort Wayne losing to Midland demonstrated that the other clubs were building up to the Pistons.

Fred Zollner made a point of attending as many games as he could, which required some planning for a businessman as busy as he was. If the team's schedule called for games in Cleveland, he booked his appointments in Cleveland for those days. The same with Peoria and Detroit. Later, when he had an airplane, it was easier, because he could still spend all day at the plant in Fort Wayne and still fly to the out-of-town engagements. Leo Luken also appreciated the plane, because his job often kept him late at the factory. He sometimes joined Fred and Mary Lyons when they flew to the games.

Instead of a spring swing through Iowa, Illinois and Indiana, the Pistons set up a series of clinics and tryout schools at the Concordia Gym in Fort Wayne or outdoors, weather permitting. Three sessions were for pitchers and catchers, three others for infielders and outfielders.

They took their show on the road to several surrounding towns — Auburn, Bluffton, Hartford City, Warsaw, Kendallville and Van Wert — for intrasquad games. The Pistons took turns beating the Zollners and visa versa, but the stimulus was to step up fastball interest.

The Pistons probably played more exhibition games than those on the league schedule. In the industrial league, there were not enough teams to keep everyone busy. So much depended on whether individual cor-

porations were willing to spend the money required. Fred Zollner was, but he was unique among the industrialists of his day.

The Pistons travelled everywhere, promoting fastball and entertaining fans. Exhibition games were meant to demonstrate good playing, but they were also meant to put on a show. Since the local teams they played were not on their level, the Pistons were careful not to humiliate them.

Pregame warmups were also part of the show. In an act which the players called "the no-brainer act", two rows of four or five men would throw the ball to each other, passing it on as quickly as they could. At first, they would throw only to the man across from themselves, but soon the balls began criss-crossing the lines. Although it was carefully rehearsed, it looked spontaneous. The fans loved it. Eventually, Rodger Nelson suggested adding fluorescent paint to the balls and turning out the lights. Only the balls were visible, whizzing through the dark.

The act ended with the balls being thrown randomly. "We would seem to goof up," Bill Johnston said, and all the players leapt out of the way. Sometimes, the applause for the dazzling pregame outdid that for the game.

One of the first priorities now was to bolster the pitching staff. Big (six-foot-five) Elmer MacDonald became a free agent when Toledo's Buddy Lunches team dropped out after two years in the National Softball League.

Originally from that softball-fertile area of Covington-Newport, Big Mac had pitched with Bill West and the Sixth Ward Boosters before moving to Toledo for Virg Gladioux's Buddy Lunch. He was the work-horse of the entire league, setting a record thirty-one appearances in 1947 and thirty-six in 1948. He had beaten the Pistons eight times over the two year period. His brother, Don, was on the Midland staff. MacDonald set an all-time NSL record with 22 wins in the 1948 season while managing the Toledo entry. He had an interesting style, slower to get ready on the mound than other pitchers.

The Pistons started the 1949 campaign with a 15-man roster: Curly Armstrong (back after a year's absence because of finger surgery), Barille, Flowers, Goldberg, Billy and Hughie Johnston, Kampschmidt, Lombardo, Luken, Palcheff, Ramage, Robitaille, Rohrs and West.

The National Fastball League set up a 60-game schedule. Toledo and Cleveland were gone, leaving a six-team Eastern Division of Fort Wayne, Midland, Flint, Windsor, Detroit and Columbus.

Curious to see how tough their conquerors from 1948 were, 6000 fans turned out for the traditional opening doubleheader against Midland on Memorial Day. West won the opener, 5-1, but big John Skolnicki, acquired by Dows from defunct Cleveland, shut out the Z's 2-0 in the nightcap.

Four rookies graduated from the Zollner tryout schools, with 19-year-old Lowell Duerk making the traveling squad. Fifteen-year-old Chuck Shearer, former batboy and promising pitcher, Tom Barfell, and Rol Kenneke dressed for the home games. Duerk attracted quite a following from his home town, Defiance.

After the early loss to Midland, the Pistons went on a 19-game winning tear. Nine straight shutouts were in the string and Rohrs had a perfect game and West a no-hitter on the same night in 4-0 and 2-0 wins over the South Bend Tribune.

Midland was the only enemy coming close by midseason and fastball interest was high. A stadium record crowd of 6700 turned out for the Fourth of July fireworks and a 1-0 win over rugged Flint. With only 60 games scheduled in the league, the exhibition schedule was heavy.

Skolnicki, always one of the best, was a particular nemesis and beat the Pistons five times during the year. By mid-August, the Pistons had the season well in hand, running ahead of their record 113-game winning season of 1947 and five games ahead of 1948 when they won 99, but lost more than 20 for the first time.

The offensive bats were booming and the club was hitting 30 percentage points (above .250) ahead of the last two seasons. Zollner Stadium activity was heavy with 14000 Knot Hole members and a Carnival of Stars circus attraction. The ball club had to hit the road for three weeks as the outdoor Holiday On Ice came in for its second annual visit.

The world champion girls' team, the famous New Orleans Jax, filled out a double-header exhibition, losing to a men's team from Dayton after the Pistons beat Toledo 5-1 in the opener. By mid-August, the Z's had not lost an exhibition. All eight defeats had been in the NFL.

The Z's finished the league schedule 51-8, or 14 1/2 games ahead of second place Midland. They coasted through Flint in the first playoff round then waited for a rematch with Midland. They were ready to even last year's score.

Midland won the first game in Fort Wayne 5-2, with Skolnicki doing the pitching and first baseman Jack Kett supplying the offensive

punch. West came back to win the second game 1-0, beating Midland's Bill Gourley.

In the third game, Midland jumped on Elmer MacDonald early but Luken came to the rescue, and the Pistons whomped Skolnicki 10-3. Ironically, Elmer's brother, Don, finished up for Skolnicki. Fort Wayne's MacDonald started the game; Midland's MacDonald finished and neither one got a decision.

The Zollners got their Eastern championship back and went on to beat Bloomington State Farm Insurance in four straight for the first official National Fastball League championship. Then it was on to Lancaster, New York, to meet the American League champs.

In a season finale that was embarrassing, Fort Wayne smothered Lancaster. At Zollner Stadium, Lancaster was fairly respectable, losing 5-0 and 5-1, but back in the Buffalo suburbs, Elmer Rohrs pitched a perfect game, 11-0 and walloped Lancaster 17-1 in the finale.

It was undignified enough that Piston officials asked for a suspension of the "world series" until the Americans could build up to National League status.

The final count was 114 wins, 10 losses. It was perhaps Bill West's finest year, winning 36, losing two and striking out a remarkable 452 batters in 285 innings. Ramage had his best home run year, leading the league with nine and 15 overall.

Their 114 wins set an all-time Fort Wayne record. When the season ended, manager Bernie Kampschmidt declared it "the greatest team I've ever seen."

1950

Veterans Chick Goldberg and Curly Armstrong announced their retirement from fastball. Goldberg was one of the game's finest all-round performers and could play any position. He had been with the Bendix Brakes of South Bend in their heyday and had been a member of the Pistons for five years, playing in two of their three world's ASA Championships. His loss was particularly crucial because he could spell manager Bernie Kampschmidt behind the plate. Kampschmidt's main backup now was Johnny Palcheff, primarily an infielder-outfielder.

Armstrong came to the Pistons from Indiana University to play basketball but was well-rounded enough athletically to get a starting job with the fastballers. He is best remembered for the home run which won a

game in the ASA world finals in 1946 and also for being declared ineligible for the 1947 world's because of his basketball career.

The American League "world series" was a shambles when the Pistons annihilated Lancaster, New York, in four straight, but catcher Dick Szymanski caught the eye of the talent-searching Pistons. He later joined them as a catcher for the 1950 campaign.

Defiance's Lowell Duerk came out of the Pistons' tryout camps in 1949 and made the team, but the veterans still did not give him any responsibilities in NFL competition, saving him for the rigorous exhibition schedules.

On the business side, Rodger Nelson resigned in April 1950 to become sports editor of the *Ohio State Journal* in Columbus, his home town. Fort Wayne native Al Busse, who was graduating from Indiana University, was hired for the press, radio and promotional work with Carl Bennett.

To stimulate interest in the game of fastball, manager Bernie Kampschmidt scheduled three tryout, instructional camps in May, taking the pitchers and catchers in the morning sessions, infielders and outfielders in the afternoons. Except for Duerk, there were no survivors of the 1949 instructional schools.

The amateur softball world continued with changes. Charlie Justice, called the "Satchel Paige" of softball, finally broke through with the Toronto Tip Top Tailors and took the world's ASA championship. This, of course, was without challenge from the National Fastball League teams.

A newcomer on the scene was the formidable Clearwater (Florida) Bombers, who still remain a major factor in the softball world. Justice won the championship at the expense of Clearwater 3-1 in the 18-inning finals. Still wanting to assert the Zollner supremacy, Carl Bennett immediately worked Toronto and Clearwater into the 1950 schedule.

The National Fastball League adopted a highly ambitious 80-game League schedule. The emphasis was on league play, with fewer exhibitions. Fort Wayne's division included Midland, Flint, Detroit, Columbus and Windsor.

In addition to Clearwater and Toronto, the Pistons' exhibition challengers included the Oklahoma Cowboys, who were connected to the Tulsa Oilers who nosed the Pistons out in 1942.

The Knot Hole Gang program expanded with more than 22,400 signed up through the Fort Wayne Community Schools and surrounding Allen County systems. Included in the Knot Hole program was a new

Bernie KAMPSCHMIDT

CAPABLE MANAGER
OF THE
**ZOLLNER
PISTONS**
FASTBALL
TEAM
!!



HE JOINED
THE ZOLLNER
ORGANIZATION
IN 1940

— HAS LONG HAD
A REPUTATION OF
BEING ONE OF THE
BEST CATCHERS IN
THE BUSINESS —



UNDER BERNIE'S
LEADERSHIP, THE PISTONS
HAVE WON 632 GAMES
AND LOST ONLY 80..... A
RECORD FOR FASTBALL TEAMS
THROUGHOUT THE NATION

THE PISTONS HAVE WON
3 WORLD ASA TITLES
AND 5 WORLD'S FASTBALL
CHAMPIONSHIPS IN THE
PAST 6 YEARS !



fastball league for the youngsters. Zollner players would serve as team managers for Knot Holers wanting to participate in a league schedule that would be played during summer mornings at Zollner Stadium.

It was an 'everybody plays' theme. There would be champions and a regular playoff system for the Knot Hole Gang. The Pistons would provide T-shirts, playing equipment and caps.

The Zollner roster for the year was: Jim Ramage, Bill West, Ernie Flowers, Dick Szymanski, Lowell Duerk, Ed Robitaille, Elmer MacDonald, Kampschmidt, Billy and Hughie Johnston, Sam Lombardo, Leo Luken, Johnny Palcheff, Elmer Rohrs and Neal Barille.

The Pistons carried an 11-game winning streak into the opening of the season. It was the traditional Midland double-header, which the Zollners handled 2-0 and 2-1. The exhibition season opened with a 5-0 romp at Rockford, Ohio. Through the first 14 games in the NFL schedule the Pistons stood at 12-2. The only defeats were handed them by Detroit, one a 2-0 shutout by Detroit's Al Wierzbicki.

By the Fourth of July in 1950, the Pistons had piled up a five and one-half game lead over the Dows. The spark of this rivalry brought out the largest crowd (7100) in stadium history for the fireworks show on and off the field. The Pistons nosed out Midland, 3-2.

Oklahoma's Cowboys had been beaten 2-1 in their Fort Wayne invasion, so with a comfortable lead, the Pistons waited for the Clearwater Bombers and their two pitching aces, Herb Dudley and Johnny Hunter. The Bombers (like the Pistons in 1942 and 1944) were just a win away from the World's in 1949. It was Hunter's rookie year with the Bombers. Both Dudley and Hunter are now in the Softball Hall of Fame.

The Pistons had the better pitchers in the double-header wins, Rohrs throwing an 8-0 no-hitter and West, a 2-0 one-hitter.

The National Fastball League was still not solid, except for the Pistons and Midland. Scheduled for eighty games, the Pistons played seventy-six, winning sixty-five of them. Dow won forty-nine and lost twenty-two, giving them 71 games total and finishing thirteen and one half games behind the Zollners.

Fort Wayne would have completed its schedule but inclement weather, plus the fact that the two remaining double-headers were insignificant in the final standing, prompted cancellation of the four games, without rescheduling them.

The Pistons were to face Columbus (who had a 31-37 record) while the Chemicals went against Detroit in the first round playoffs. Flint finished fifth and Windsor sixth in the race.

In late August the showdown against the reigning ASA champion Toronto Tip Tops was the premier attraction. After humbling Charlie Justice and his gang, 5-0, the Pistons started throwing rice instead of fastballs.

On August 26, 1950, veteran pitcher Elmer MacDonald took Hyrlene Ivy for his bride in the only wedding (to date) ever held at Zollner Stadium. Appropriately, the wedding took place on the pitcher's mound with the entire ball club attending.

A scheduled double-header was rained out the following night but in the three innings before the rain, Fort Wayne had pulled away to a 3-0 lead, so the world's ASA champs from Canada had not scored a run against the Z's in twelve innings played in the series billed as the "unofficial world's championship."

Now it was playoff time and Fort Wayne eliminated Columbus in three of four games. West received credit for all three wins

The Eastern Division finals were four of seven against Midland, which had already eliminated Detroit. The Pistons won the first two, 9-2 and 5-0, but the Dows bounced back and evened the series, 11-8 and 6-3. There was definitely more offense in the game. Fort Wayne won the next two, 4-0 and 4-1 for the Eastern Division championship and the right to meet Bloomington State Farm Insurance for the 1950 pennant. Bloomington was completely shut down by Piston pitching and did not score a run in the final series, getting blown out 7-0, 4-0, 12-0 and 1-0. Rohrs finished strong for the Z's, winning his last five starts to finish at 34-6 for the year.

The Korean War was at hand and West was recalled to Army duty at Fort Lewis, Washington, after winning 32 of his 36 decisions. MacDonald, steady as ever, stood at 27-4. Luken was spending more time in the plant as production manager but had a respectable 15-3 run.

Rookie Duerk, also headed for the service, was at 5-0. The Pistons had finally given the Defiance youngster a league assignment, against Detroit. He wobbled through, 5-4, to keep his record unblemished.

Hughie Johnston wound up with the team's best batting average, .309, and Ernie Flowers belted nineteen homers. Neal Barille broke a league record by scoring fifty runs, edging Midland's Jack Kett.

For the third time in the last four seasons the Pistons had won more than one hundred games. They had missed the fourth (1948) by a single game. The heavier league schedule in 1950 found them losing a total of seventeen games for the year.

Once again they had conquered everything in the sport: the outright regular season and the playoff championship of the National Fastball League.

The Pistons remained as the supreme fastball power of the land.

1951

Fred Zollner's pursuit of perfection seemed relentless. The Zollner Armada, already king of the fastball oceans, added a couple of aircraft carriers and destroyers for the 1951 season.

The Pistons had marched through all opposition in 1950. However, Bill West had been called for military service and there was a possibility that Elmer MacDonald might retire early. This ignited a retrenching call for the 1951 season. As it happened, West's military absence was short and he returned before the beginning of the 1951 season.

The ball club had gone through a 130-game schedule in 1950 (perhaps its most taxing season) with all the activity of coaching Knot Hole teams and neighboring exhibitions promoting fastball.

The 80-game National Fastball League schedule had proved too tough for some of the members and the Pistons settled back into a less strenuous six-team league, the National Industrial Fastball League. Its members were bunched around the greater Detroit area and made for more convenient scheduling. It looked like the best opportunity for establishing a strong, industrial, corporate competition that would embrace the best of fastball and build toward the "major league" dreams of 1947 when the Pistons stepped away from ASA tournament play to concentrate on building a strong National Softball League.

The Midland Dow Chemicals were the only consistent competitors which came up to the Zollner expectations. They kept building up to the Pistons. With the other teams, it was one or two shots before they would fade away.

The Pistons' domination of the sport was thorough. They met every challenge, but the paradox was that Zollner's efforts to make a "super league" were, in effect, turning against him. The "thrill of victory" was becoming the "agony of victory" as Fort Wayne was winning too much for their own good.

The entire Zollner infield was elected to the NFL All-Star team — Ed Robitaille at third, Jim Ramage at short, Billy Johnston at second, and

brother Hughie at first. Elmer MacDonald had the best pitching percentage; Bill West, the most strikeouts. In the voting, Columbus' Jimmy Clark, a fine black catcher, nosed out Fort Wayne's Kampschmidt as the backstop.

Clearwater's aspiring Bombers became the ASA champs. This was the team which had been runner-up in 1949 and had invited Fort Wayne for a double-header during 1950, getting one hit in two games.

Zollner's immediately challenged them, but cleared away their battery in the process. They signed pitcher Herb Dudley and catcher Harry Hancock to the Piston roster for 1951, and decided to hold spring training at Clearwater, which was also the training camp for baseball's National League Philadelphia Phillies.

The Z's also added fleet-footed Bill Jones from the Detroit area and pitcher Frank Harvey from the Newport-Cincinnati wars. Jones was an outfielder who had been clocked at 9.8 in the 100-yard dash and Harvey had taken a Cincinnati Coca-Cola team to the ASA world's tournament.

Bill Hilgefert, a steady performer in the outfield, had never broken into the starting lineup and retired to Cincinnati to work in the Postal Service. It was a beefed-up 18-man squad that headed south to Clearwater for spring training. Hancock and Dudley would join them there. The traveling squad was Bill Jones, Sam Lombardo, Jim Ramage, Neal Barille, Ernie Flowers, Bernie Kampschmidt, Ed Robitaille, Johnny Palcheff, Dick Szymanski, Hughie Johnston, Elmer Rohrs, Billy Johnston, Leo Luken, Elmer MacDonald, Bill West and Frank Harvey. A six-man pitching staff, three fulltime catchers, an All-American outfield and infield. It may have been the best fastball personnel roster in the history of the game.

Eighteen games were booked throughout Florida and in Georgia and Tennessee on the way home. Four of the games were against the newly-crowned world champion Bombers from the ASA tournament. The Pistons won the first three games of the set and, in what was billed as the "softball-fastball world series championship game," Herb Dudley was to go against his former Clearwater teammates and youngster John Hunter, a speedballing lefty.

Hunter threw a no-run, no-hit game at the Pistons, and Dudley lost his first Fort Wayne start. It was the first time in their fastball history that the Pistons had no hits. However, it added drama to spring training and the Pistons returned to Fort Wayne with a 17-1 record to start the 1951 campaign.

Dudley finally got his first Piston win at Jacksonville (4-2). Harvey was given a lot of work to test his mettle and Rohrs was the main star, winning six of the 17 decisions.

Their basketball cousins, the professional Pistons, had replaced Murray Mendenhall with Paul Birch as head coach and Birch and Bennett had drafted a flock of collegians for the next NBA race. Promotion-minded Bennett suggested a basketball get-acquainted spring camp that would wind up with an intrasquad game, giving opening night fastball fans a unique basketball-fastball doubleheader on May 26, 1951.

The weather man did not cooperate and the basketball game was called after one quarter. The fastball game against Columbus was canceled. The Detroit Briggs came in May 30 to pick up the same program and the "Zollners" — Fred Schaus, Boag Johnson, Jack Kerris, Larry Foust and Frank Brian — beat the "Pistons" — John Oldham, Charlie Share, Jim Riffe, Art Burris and Bob Garrison — 47-36 in basketball while Bill West pitched a 5-0 shutout over Briggs in fastball.

Briggs Beautyware was a member of the NIFL along with Midland, Toledo Champion Sparkplugs, Detroit Hudson Motors, Detroit Ford Motors, Pontiac, Michigan GMC Truck and Coach. The opening Memorial Night game was billed as an exhibition.

The NIFL board had a stable air, with Charles Pink of Ford Motors, presiding, Tom Canary of Midland as vice-president, and Harold Welch of Pontiac GMC as treasurer. The new commissioner was W.E. Landis. Bennett was on the board of directors with Frank Calvenna, of Detroit Hudson, and Dan Lapinski, of Briggs.

The Pistons, already well seasoned after starting their spring training in mid-April, opened their league play at Midland, Rohrs and Luken winning, 2-1 and 3-0. The home opener was against Pontiac and Piston bats rattled out 21 hits in 7-1 and 10-3 wins, MacDonald won his third of the year, and rookie Harvey his fourth.

The Pistons had two batboys, teenagers who helped the team out in various ways. During the 1951 season, one of the boys reached the retirement age of 17 or 18 and was replaced by Stan Hood.

The batboys were not paid, but wore the Piston uniform and worked all the home games. It was a dream position for a young fan. Asked how he got the job, Hood said he could not remember. He supposed it had something to do with his father, a city fire-fighter, and something to do with the fact that he hung around Zollner Stadium a great deal. He stayed with the team until it folded in 1954.

The home games were all at night. Players and batboys arrived at six for batting practice. The batboy's job was to stand near the pitcher and feed him balls. It was a quick business, "almost like a machine," Hood said, "And when there was a drive out past the pitcher's mound, it was an exercise in agility."

As the game drew near, the boys sorted and arranged the bats. During the game, the batboys alternated, two or three innings at a time. The one who was not tending to the bats ran to the concession stand for coffee for the players, and stocked the locker-room refrigerator with drinks for after the game.

Sometimes the batboys would be sent to the bullpen to help the pitchers warm up. The pitching was faster than the boys were used to, but it was a thrill to feel you were part of the game.

By mid-season, the Z's were coasting along unbeaten in league play and had a 43-4 record. Losses were suffered to Midland (in a non-league game), Bloomington, Illinois, South Bend Studebakers and the early season loss to Clearwater and Hunter. Rohrs and Harvey were unbeaten and five of the regulars were hitting better than .300.

Newcomer Hancock was a pleasant surprise with a .394 average, alternating behind home plate and in the outfield while Lombardo was a healthy .367, Hughie, .336 and Robitaille, .301. Even Neal Barille had his first home run of the season in a 6-2 romp at Rockford, Ohio.

The 3-2 loss to Bloomington happened in a rain-shortened five innings. The Z's got even when they invited the State Farm team over for the Fourth of July fireworks show and a stadium crowd of 5500 saw a lot of sparkle in the Fort Wayne 8-0 win.

All phases of the Knot Hole Gang flourished. Curly Armstrong was directing the activities for more than 23,000 members in free Knot Hole admissions, free swimming in the city pools, and play in the Knot Hole Fastball Leagues.

A midsummer game was at Bridgeport against one of the top industrial sponsors, Raybestos' Cardinals. Raybestos holds the record for world's ASA women's softball (ASA) championship and won the men's world's in 1955 and 1958. Rain shortened Raybestos' misery to seven innings but MacDonald and West combined for a 5-0 shutout.

In early August Fort Wayne answered a challenge from the famous squad at Grumann, an aircraft manufacturer, and its star pitcher, Roy Stephenson. A game was booked into New York's Polo Grounds, home of the New York Giants, and it attracted a crowd of 17,275, believed to have been the largest assemblage ever to watch the Pistons play.

Dudley bested Stephenson 3-0 and Hancock had an inside-the-park home run, maybe the only fastball four-bagger in the Polo Grounds' history. The following night, Grumann took the Pistons to their own ball park on Long Island. Fort Wayne never strutted its championship style any better, whacking out thirteen hits in a 10-0 romp against Stephenson and Johnston as West struck out 25 in the nine-inning shutout.

As Bernie Kampschmidt remembered it, Bill West was pitching, but was annoyed that he had not pitched in the big field the night before. To demonstrate his feelings, he threw hard and extra fast. An extra fillip to the eastern trip that included New York was that Donnie Turner, the batboy, was included. The teenagers knew that the trips were financially advantageous to the batboys. The players were given money for meals while they were on the road. The boys were included in the handout, but Stan Hood remembers that the players usually paid for his meals when he ate with them. The result was money in his pocket, a nice feeling for a young lad in those days.

Opposition at Altoona, Pennsylvania, was so weak that the Pistons loaned them three of their own pitchers, and the heavy Zollner bats still beat up on them.

The Zollner domination of the sport was leading to complications as other teams and sponsors got restless. They wanted to be champions and not just contenders.

The handwriting should have been on the wall with the schedule slowdown in the National Industrial Fastball League. Several non-league games were played against Midland. The Pistons ambitiously tried to revive the national industrial tournament. Ten teams responded for a four-day event on September 6-9.

Meanwhile, the Pistons breezed through their 23-game NIFL schedule. Midland, stronger than ever before, finished second with a 20-4 mark; Toledo's Champion Spark Plugs and Briggs tied at 10-13.

Teams were drifting back into ASA tournament play with Detroit as the host city. Midland re-entered the ASA world's, and won it. It was the only world's title for the Dows.

After winning the world's, the Dows came as one of the ten entrants in the Pistons' invitational world's industrial tournament. There were teams from California, New Jersey, Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana, and Illinois. The Hickam Field Flyers from Hawaii were scheduled but the Army canceled their air travel at the last minute. Midland was fresh from winning the ASA.

Rohrs threw a no hitter at Summit, New Jersey, 10-0 and West shut out the Peoria Diesel Caterpillars 1-0 which led to a showdown with Midland. The Pistons had a two-run lead in the extra-inning ninth on homers by Hughie Johnston and Ernie Flowers. The Dows threatened Herb Dudley with two runners on, none out, when Al Linde rifled a shot at Jim Ramage. Ramage speared it, stepped on second and fired to Johnston at first, for the Z's first-ever triple play.

Beating Midland 1-0 in the double elimination championship seemed anti-climactic after that, as Rohrs threw another no-hitter.

They finished their unblemished NIFL season with two wins over Toledo and three over Midland in the playoffs. And that ended the season, with 42 wins in a row, a 101-6 record, second best percentage ever in a season. The best had been 72-4 in 1945.

Rohrs (23) and Harvey (13) were unbeaten, MacDonald was 18-1; Dudley, 17-2; West, 24-2; and Luken, 6-1. Lombardo had the best average, .339; Hancock, .328; and H. Johnston, .326. The team hit a record .256. Flowers broke his own home run record with 20.

The Zollner business office was never busier, trying to keep Zollner Stadium busy with the annual outdoor ice show, Holiday On Ice, and even booking the George Mikan All-Stars against the Harlem Globetrotters outdoors on Labor Day night. When Al Busse left for the Korean War, Rodger Nelson had returned to handle press and radio duties.

1952

The Pistons had to ask themselves what to do for an encore as they reviewed 1951, which had to be one of peak performances for any fastball club ever.

Midland, looking for its first championship, had strayed back into ASA tournament play and had won the world's championship. The team could beat anyone else in softball, but not the Pistons. Their only four National Industrial Softball losses were at the hands of the Zollners.

The Dows beat the other clubs in league play twenty times. Overall, Midland and Fort Wayne played seventeen times during the 1951 campaign, the Pistons winning fifteen of them. This included the National Industrial tournament, which Fort Wayne hosted.

There were 28 unbeaten games for the Pistons in winning the regular season and playoffs in the NIFL. Clearwater, 1950's defending champs in ASA, won one of seven games. That was a no-hit stunner at the hands of young John Hunter, who was replacing Midland's Clyde Dexter as the nation's best left-hander.

But the Z's wound up with a 49-game winning streak and this is what they carried into Clearwater for 1952 spring training. And Fred (The Raider) Zollner dotted another "i" and crossed another "t" by signing Roby Crouch, who had helped Clearwater win its first world's ASA in 1950. Crouch was basically an infielder and was to give Ed Robitaille some relief at third base. He could also catch and play the outfield.

Within four of their all-time win streak record, the Pistons were primed to repeat their 1951 spring debut in Clearwater.

The Bombers were better prepared, however. By Fort Wayne standards, the spring grind was almost a disaster. They tackled the Bombers in the very first game and had their winning streak snapped 4-3 by Hunter. It turned out to be the first of five times that Hunter would beat them during the year.

But the Z's could not get their heavy artillery unleashed. During one stretch of three games, they had only two hits, an all-time low. That naturally would have to include a no-hitter, thrown at them by Eddie Miller of Peerless Woolen Mills of Rossville, Georgia. It was the second no-hitter ever against the Pistons. The other had been a year earlier by Hunter in Clearwater.

One of the most famous softball pitchers of all-time was Eddie Feighner, who was still active in the 1990's. Feighner was an excellent pitcher and toured the country with his "King and His Court" routine which included only three other players. The Court would play regular teams and with his many trick deliveries, Feighner could hold his own on the exhibition circuit. He would sometimes throw blindfolded or through his legs.

On one memorable occasion, Neal "Fast as Lightning" Barille was on first. He edged away, and Feighner threw behind his back without looking. Hughie Johnston said, "He had Neal out. It was so fast, the umpire didn't even see it."

The Pistons had not played Feighner; he said they were afraid to. However, on the spring trip, the Pistons booked the strong American Industrial Sales team for games in Boca Raton and Miami. Herb Dudley beat the AIS team with Feighner pitching.

The other AIS pitcher, Arno Lamb, set down the Pistons the following night, 3-1, in Miami. At least the Pistons remained unbeaten to Feighner, who had been featured in a *Life* magazine article prior to the Zollner game.

In the 4-3 opening loss to Clearwater, Elmer Rohrs had his personal winning streak of 29 broken and came out with a sore arm. He was not used further on the spring trip. Leo Luken, who was cutting down his playing time to concentrate on his role as production manager at the Zollner Machine Works, did not make the trip.

Things seemed more ominous when Clearwater beat the Pistons in a double-header, 1-0 and 4-0, before the Pistons started home. As they stopped in Canton, North Carolina, their record was 5-5. Two wins in Canton brought them home at 7-5.

But they had lost their first twin bill since 1948, had a 49-game winning streak punctured and had been no-hit in Rossville, Georgia. This, after having lost only six games in all of 1951! Intrasquad exhibitions at Markle and Zanesville prepped the Z's for their home opener against Midland's ASA world's champs.

Rohrs was ready again and shut out the Dows 5-1 (his first win of the year) and Herb Dudley won the second when the Pistons overcame a three-run deficit to post a 4-3 ten-inning win. A crowd of 2900 filled the stadium for the Memorial Day event. 2300 more came the next night when the Pistons beat the Carolina champs, Canton, 3-1 and 1-0. The southerners looked spunky enough for an invitation to the industrial tournament.

The Z's fared better than the parachute jump planned as part of the opening night festivities. Captain Smiley O'Timmons was scheduled to land on second base for the flag raising, but he missed second base and the ball park and landed in some nearby woods. He got back to the park in time for the second game.

For both the kids and bigger fans, the attractions of Zollner Stadium included the snacks on sale. An innovation were the Pronto Pups, later known as corn dogs. Pronto Pups were dipped and fried fresh while the customers watched. Another new treat also on sale was the sno-cone, ice with syrup poured over it in various fruit flavors. Kids of the day loved them.

Another big baseball park appearance was next for the Zollners. They played in the Kansas City Blues' stadium in a polio benefit game against the regional champion Union Wire Rope team. They kept their big

ballpark record clean with a 4-0, 1-0 sweep of the double-header. Dudley and Rohrs were the pitchers.

The National Industrial Fastball League had its usual personnel changes, with Detroit Ford asking for a one-year demit. The League wound up with two four-team divisions: Midland, Detroit Briggs, Pontiac GMC, and Detroit Hudson in the northern half; Fort Wayne, Cleveland Schraders, Detroit Steel and Adrian Hurd Lock in the southern half.

By mid-July quite a few things had been happening to the Pistons. Among them was the loss of the National Industrial Tournament championship to the Detroit Briggs. In a huge July 3-6 fastball bash, 12 of the country's best industrial teams came to Zollner stadium. At the July 4th fireworks show, 5639 fans turned out for some fine tournament fastball, fireworks, and a celebration for Bernie Kampschmidt, Leo Luken and Jim Ramage, who were cited for their twelve years with the team.

They were the first two major imports that built the fastball dynasty into world's championship class. Management, on behalf of the fans, gave each a television set.

The tournament, as usual, was double elimination. In typical, historical form it boiled down to a triangle finish between Fort Wayne, Midland and Detroit Briggs. The Pistons had advanced through the winner's bracket with a 4-2 win over the Aurora Sealmasters, 4-0 over Buffalo Bell Aircraft and 2-1 over Kansas City Union Wire Rope.

Detroit's Johnny Spring had dropped Midland into the loser's bracket, 2-0, but the Dows' John Skolnicki kept them alive with a 2-0 win over Bloomington State Farm. The Pistons and Briggs were the last survivors in the winner's bracket.

A sacrifice fly by Art Mueller with the bases loaded was the only run. Al Wierzbicki was the winner over Herb Dudley. Wierzbicki needed help from Spring when Billy Jones led off with a double and Rohrs finished up for Dudley. A 250-foot blast over the left field fence by Kampschmidt barely went foul, which would have been a game winner in the seventh. But the Pistons had to come back and play Sunday noon.

They beat Buffalo Bell Aircraft, which had survived by toppling Raybestos 2-1, by a score of 7-1. Then, in the second Sunday afternoon game, they blasted Midland, 12-3, rapping Don MacDonald, Dexter and Al Linde for eleven hits. Rohrs had won both afternoon games, with Luken and West as helpers.

That put them in the championship finals against Briggs, with Detroit just one win away from the crown.

In the first game, West beat Wierzbicki, 3-0. The second night game found Rohrs going against Spring. A tiring Rohrs left after four innings, relieved by West.

The teams battled through twelve scoreless innings. In the 13th, Briggs manager Jerry Zarick took things in his own hands and tripled, sending two runs home. Bill Jones homered for the Pistons in the bottom of the inning but Spring prevailed. The championship game ended at 2:30 Monday morning.

Because of an ankle injury to Hancock, Kampschmidt caught all sixty-two innings of tournament play, including thirty-four innings Sunday. The Pistons surrendered their industrial championship crown.

Things went better in NIFL play and they tapped on twenty-four more consecutive wins in league play, stretching their unbeaten string to fifty-two games over the two years. In early August, their record stood at 89-10. The hitting leaders were Hughie Johnston (.356), Ernie Flowers (.319), Jim Ramage (.311), Sam Lombardo (.305), Bill Jones (.301) and Neal Barille (.283).

In pitching, Luken was unbeaten in eight decisions. Chuck Shearer had been brought up from the reserve team. His record was 5-0; MacDonald, 16-1; Rohrs, 18-1; Dudley 18-3; and West 19-4.

Everyone had high performance expectations, however. Frank Harvey had been 13-0 in 1951, won his first five in 1952, then was knocked out of the box by Toledo and demoted to the reserve team. With an 18-1 record, he was no longer on the team.

The others on the 1952 roster were Ed Robitaille, Harry Hancock, Roby Crouch, Kampschmidt, Billy Johnston and John Palcheff. Dick Szymanski had gone back to Buffalo, and played against Fort Wayne in the industrial tournament for Bell Aircraft. Later in the year Shearer would return to the reserve club to help them in their ASA tournament play.

After the industrial tournament loss, the Pistons went on another tear, winning 33 straight before Dan Windle stopped them at Bloomington's State Farm park, 2-1. In the NIFL, the Pistons went to 29-0 before losing a late season 3-1 game to Midland (Dexter vs. Rohrs). It was only Rohrs' second loss of the year, the first happening back in early May in Clearwater.

That made the league record 65-2 for the two years, including playoffs. The 1952 playoffs went to Fort Wayne, two straight over the Cleveland Schraders and then three out of four over Midland. Midland's playoff win was a solid 10-2 bashing of the Pistons.

For the year, the Pistons wound up 110-14 in all games. Offensive records were established: team hitting .273 and H. Johnston's .340. These would be very respectable marks in major league baseball. Four others were above .300: Flowers .320, Ramage .316, Lombardo and Jones, both at .302.

On the hill, Rohrs was 25-2; West 24-4; Dudley 24-4; MacDonald 18-3; Luken 9-0; Shearer 5-0; Harvey 5-1. West beat Dudley in strikeouts, 350-341.

The seasons were ending earlier, with the other teams getting back into ASA world's tournament play. The 1952 tournament went to Bridgeport, Connecticut, home of Raybestos. Midland was defending champion. Detroit Briggs won the world's in 1952, adding it to their national industrial crown.

On the business side, Phil Olofson, a twelve-year veteran with the Fort Wayne *News-Sentinel* sports staff, joined Bennett and Nelson in the Zollner press-promotion department.

1953

Whatever lay ahead for the Zollner Pistons in 1953, the Zollner management was preparing to meet it head-on. Their star search for talent was never-ending.

Comfortable with winning the National Industrial Fastball League title again and whacking Midland 3-1 in the playoffs, the Z's major piece of business was winning back the industrial tournament championship that Detroit Briggs had taken away from them, and adding solidarity to the always-shifting NIFL picture.

There were rumors afloat that the Pistons might even reconsider their ASA stand and return to tournament competition. With the Pistons on the sidelines, three of their staunchest rivals had won the last three ASA world's: Clearwater Bombers in 1950, Midland Dow Chemicals in 1951, Detroit Briggs Beautyware in 1952 at Bridgeport.

The NIFL finals were scheduled around the ASA tournament dates.

The NIFL stayed at six teams with Fort Wayne, Midland, Detroit Briggs, Pontiac GMC Truck and Coach, Adrian Industries and newcomer, Muskegon Continental Motors. They would play a 40-game schedule.



1953 champion Zollner Piston fastballers. In front, batboys Don Turner and Stan Hood. First row L to R: Ed Robitaille, Jim Ramage, Neal Barille, sponsor Fred Zollner, manager Bernie Kampschmidt, Sam Lombardo, Elmer Rohrs, trainer Stan Kenworthy. Middle row L to R: Hughie Johnston, John Marsden, Harry Hancock, John Palcheff, Chuck Shearer, Ernie Flowers, Jim Jones. Back row L to R: Bill Johnston, Leo Luken, Elmer MacDonald, Lowell Duerk, Gene Igot, Bill West, Jack Bloomfield.

Dipsy-doodling Herb Dudley had returned to Clearwater after two seasons with the Pistons. He had contributed 24 of the Pistons' 110 wins. Roby Crouch would start late because he was finishing up his college career at Clemson.

The Zollners signed three budding stars newly out of the service: infielder Gordon (Jack) Bloomfield, outfielder-pitcher John Marsden, and pitcher Gene Igou. Before going into the military, Igou twirled for the Canton, North Carolina, state champs, which were frequent foes of the Z's. Marsden made the world's all-star team as a pitcher.

Bloomfield had excellent baseball credentials, but the Pistons talked him into fastball. He would later play baseball for the Chicago Cubs and in Japan.

Fred Zollner had recently bought an executive DC-3 to transport his NBA basketball team, and now he loaded the fastballers up for their third spring training fling in Clearwater. Manager Bernie Kampschmidt took a full complement to Florida on the plane so he could sort out his options for the season.

Lowell Duerk had returned from the service and young Chuck Shearer, who had bounced back and forth with the Reserve Club, made the travel squad, so it was the largest in Zollner history to start the season.

Bernie stuck with his seasoned veterans for the first game, against Dudley, who was back pitching for the Bombers. The long-standing lineup of Kampschmidt, Billy and Hughie Johnston, Jim Ramage, Ed Robitaille, Bill Jones, Neal Barille and Ernie Flowers played for a 4-3 win.

John Hunter was the Clearwater pitching star. Teaming him up with Dudley and Hank McWhorter, the Bombers were aiming to get back the world's they had relinquished to Midland in 1951. They had finished runner-up to Detroit in 1952. Eight of the spring games were against the Bombers. Fort Wayne and Clearwater split them, Hunter winning all four of his starts against the Z's. This was a reminder of John Skolnicki in 1949, when he beat the Pistons five times and dethroned them in the NFL playoffs for Midland.

No pitcher in fastball history had ever beaten Fort Wayne in four straight games. Hunter was of championship caliber and rumor had it that the Pistons tried desperately to get him on their side.

One thing was certain about the Pistons. They never stopped trying to better themselves. Manager Kampschmidt said he had tried to woo Buck Miller from Memphis during Miller's prime. Most of the negotiations with other potential Pistons were, and still are, of a confi-

dential nature, however. That was Fred Zollner's method of conducting business.

The fastball Pistons were still travelling to many games by car. One regular grouping was Bernie Kampschmidt (driver), Big Bill West, Neal Barille and Jim Ramage. At six foot two and 230 pounds, Bill was the biggest man on the team. Neal was the smallest. Everyone knew Bill was "highly excitable", as Bernie described him.

Sometimes Neal and Bill would have a discussion in the car, and on one occasion, it got a little more serious. Neal suggested stopping the car so they could get out and settle the issue. He hopped out, but Bill was a little slower. As soon as he closed his door, Neal jumped back in and the car took off. They left Bill to be picked up by another car following behind. "Bill was like a big kid," says Bernie.

So the Pistons came home from their spring fling bruised and bloodied but not bowed. They were 9-5. They quickly got back into rhythm by beating Midland, 3-2 and 2-1 in the Zollner Stadium season opener, followed by four straight over the NIFL's newest member, Muskegon Continental Motors, 3-0, 3-0, 10-0 and 4-1.

The Pistons played an exhibition game in St. Joe against a team from Sechler's pickle factory. A week later, a shipment of pickles arrived at Zollner Stadium, huge jars, one for each player.

It was the batboy's job to place a jar of pickles in each player's locker during the game. It would be discovered there when the team came in to change. Stan Hood remembers that he was not careful enough when placing the jar in Neal Barille's locker. When Neal opened the door, the jar fell out and "exploded like a bomb on the floor."

Stan waited for a reaction, but Neil looked at him and smiled. He said, "If that's the worst thing that happens in your life, you'll be a lucky guy."

Fan support never wavered and Big Charlie Share, of the Piston basketball team, presided over a flock of 27,000 Knot Hole Gang members, an all-time high. Other stars from basketball found off-season work in maintaining Zollner Stadium, in advertising and ticket sales, or other promotional work for the NBA franchise as it awaited its second season in the new Memorial Coliseum in Fort Wayne.

Detroit Briggs, defending industrial tournament champs, suffered the same fate that had befallen Fort Wayne a year earlier. They were knocked into the loser's bracket early in a 3-2 upset by Bloomington. The State Farm entry beat Briggs 3-2, behind the pitching of "Hoke" Wilson, a native of Marion, Indiana. Briggs, behind John Spring worked their way

back up to the championship game, but Rohrs beat Spring in the finale 3-0, with the decisive blow being a two-run homer by Hughie Johnston.

The Z's had marched through the tournament in five straight games to regain the trophy. They beat Paducah, Kentucky, 3-1; Detroit Wyandotte Chemical, 4-0; Bloomington, 11-0; Midland, 10-0. Fort Wayne was on an offensive high; Rohrs was back in fine form and had credit for four of the five wins.

The ASA world's champs, Detroit, and Midland continued to be the major league competition for Fort Wayne, but the Z's also had their eyes on a six-game set rematch with Clearwater. It was set for the Fort Wayne Stadium in late July.

The Pistons lost only three of their first 18 NIFL starts, two to Dow and one to Briggs and enjoyed a comfortable lead.

The roster of the 1953 industrial tournament champions was: Ed Robitaille, Jim Ramage, Neal Barille, Sam Lombardo, Elmer Rohrs, Hughie Johnston, Johnny Marsden, Bernie Kampschmidt, Harry Hancock, Johnny Palcheff, Chuck Shearer, Ernie Flowers, Bill Jones, Billy Johnston, Leo Luken, Elmer MacDonald, Lowell Duerk, Gene Igou, Bill West and Jack Bloomfield.

The roster of 20 players was the most Fort Wayne ever had on a championship team. That was changed shortly after the tournament.

Veteran Billy Johnston broke up the Irish brother combination at first and second, and retired to devote more time to his work. He left Zollners, where he was assistant to personnel director Carl Bennett, to go into the investment business. Young Chuck Shearer was returned to the reserve club, and Lowell Duerk, who had come back from the service but had pitched only two innings, was released. Both Bloomfield and Palcheff had proved themselves capable replacements for Billy at second and the team had plenty of pitchers.

The next assignment, besides league play, was the six-game series with Clearwater. The Bombers were roaring through the South and had records similar to the Pistons. Hunter was unbeaten in 21 starts; Dudley had an 18-2 record, and Hank McWhorter was at 24-4.

There was a lot of publicity and fan interest when the Bombers came to town. Through their three years of feuding the teams had played 19 times, Fort Wayne winning 11. But Hunter had beaten Fort Wayne his last four starts, the best pitching record ever against the Z's.

The rivalry was very intense, and ended on a sour note. In the first double-header, the Pistons lost the opener to Hunter, 2-1, for the fifth consecutive time. After winning the second game, Fort Wayne finally

broke the Hunter "jinx" and, using their most well-tested battery (Leo Luken and Kampschmidt) beat the Bombers 3-0, giving the Clearwater star his first loss of the season. The Zollners beat him again in the third double-header.

The final game, when Hunter came on in relief, was given to the Pistons in a forfeit when Hunter was ejected from the game and the Bomber manager, Eddie Moore, refused to send his team back on the field because he had run out of pitchers. A renewal of the feud did not happen later in the season, because the Pistons declined to re-enter the ASA world's tourney.

They had taken care of Clearwater, the ASA champs in 1950, while Midland (the 1951 champs) and Detroit (the 1952 champs) still trailed them in the NIFL. They had continued to prove themselves the best in the business.

But the ASA world's was still disruptive to the NIFL. Because of teams re-entering the tournament play, the NIFL playoffs had to be scheduled around the ASA schedule. As it developed, Detroit, Clearwater and Bloomington finished 1-2-3 in the ASA.

The Pistons took the regular season championship (six games ahead of Detroit) and won the opening playoff series from Midland, 6-1 and 6-0. John Spring derailed them 7-1 in the opening series with Briggs. Fort Wayne came back for a 7-0 win and, with the series tied, Detroit had to take off for Miami and defend its ASA championship.

So the Fort Wayne team closed up the season with an indecisive finale. Their record for the season was 87-16, the first time in five years they had failed to win 100 games. In 37 meetings with the world's best — Detroit, Clearwater and Midland — their record was 25-12.

Fort Wayne ended the NIFL season with a 34-6 record. Midland, with a late season surge, had tied Detroit for second place and by a coin flip, lost second place to Briggs. Detroit ousted Muskegon as the Pistons disposed of the Dows in the first round.

By the time Detroit squared off with the Z's, it was September 12 and fall weather intervened as Detroit went south. They won two games in a row against Clearwater to defend their championship, but the Pistons had remained idle and it was decided to determine the league championship with the opening game of the 1954 schedule.

It was an unusual windup of one of the Pistons' most interesting seasons. Rookie Jack Bloomfield led the team in hitting (.301 overall) and had the best mark in the NIFL games (.337). The Pistons hit .254, a new team high. There would be more changes in 1954.

1954

The National Industrial Fastball League trophy apparently was only on loan to the Zollner Pistons. It sat in their trophy case since they had won it in 1952 and, when the 1953 championship remained unsettled, it remained there until May 29, 1954. That is when Detroit came back to town to decide the championship.

John Spring had been the hero for Briggs in the ASA tournament, winning five of the seven games played and giving Briggs their second straight ASA crown.

Briggs had won four ASA championships. The previous wins were recorded in 1937, 1948 and 1952. Strangely enough, Briggs dropped its fastball sponsorship, and Detroit appeared in the NIFL race as the Detroit Bombers for 1954. It was the same team with a different name, the same faces too, particularly Johnny Spring and manager Jerry Zarick.

Detroit came to Zollner Stadium for two double-headers on May 29 and 30, which would open the season. Of the four games, the first would count for the 1953 playoff championship. Spring beat Elmer Rohrs, 2-1. Rohrs had a no-hitter going into the fifth inning but Detroit's Dick Gazie singled two runs home, enough for the win.

A seventh inning rally by the Z's fell short. Despite singles by John Palcheff and Sam Lombardo and a double by Neal Barille, a double play erased the tying run. Fort Wayne won the other three games, but lost the one that counted for the title. None of the games counted in the 1954 NIFL schedule.

The face of the league continued to change, but seemed as sound and compact as possible. Muskegon Continental Motors, Pontiac GMC Truck and Coach and Adrian Industries dropped by the wayside, replaced by Bloomington State Farm and Aurora Sealmasters. The league then consisted of Fort Wayne, Bloomington, Detroit Bombers, Midland and the Flint Buicks.

The opening weekend proved momentous. After playing in the first game, Ed Robitaille passed out while sitting on the bench in the bottom of the first inning of the second game. An ambulance took him to Parkview Hospital, where the diagnosis was heat exhaustion.

A heart condition had kept him out of the 1946 season, so it proved to be Robitaille's last Piston game. After the Detroit series, Fred Zollner and Bernie Kampschmidt met with Robitaille and concluded that it was best for him to retire, remain on the team as coach and become supervisor of the Knot Hole program.

Hughie Johnston felt that Robey was the perfect man for the Knot Hole job. He remembered playing for a city championship in Detroit years before, and going to pick up Ed for the game. He was not home, but Hughie was directed to a nearby vacant lot, where he found Ed playing ball with some kids.

When the Knot Hole softball league was formed, with the Piston players as instructors, Ed was in his element. "He got the point across to the kids better than any of us," Hughie said.

Before Detroit left town, there were more fireworks. Detroit and Fort Wayne had always had a fiery rivalry, particularly when many of the Piston stars had performed previously for the Briggs. So when the Pistons rallied in the second game Sunday night to win in extra innings, 3-2, Roy Lombardo (Sam's brother, playing for the Bombers) got into a brawl at second base with Hughie Johnston. The riot cleared both benches.

Robitaille's exit put a big dent in the Pistons' lineup, already fairly well bent by the retirement of Elmer MacDonald and Johnny Marsden, on top of Bill Johnston's mid-season departure in 1953.

For the first time in years, the Pistons had not added any newcomers, and, it was left with a versatile 14-man squad.

Kampschmidt and Hancock would share the catching; Bill West, Elmer Rohrs, Leo Luken and Gene Igou were the pitchers; infielders were Hughie Johnston, Jack Bloomfield, Jim Ramage and John Palcheff and outfielders were Neal Barille, Sam Lombardo, Bill Jones and Ernie Flowers. Bloomfield had proved a keeper by leading the 1953 team in batting and his home run in the second game of Sunday's double-header won the extra-inning thriller.

An independent team from Hamilton, Ohio, added spice to the Pistons' June schedule. Hamilton had picked a few players from the Flint team, including Cleveland Pendergrass, described as a "slow striding, swift-pitching husky Negro." The Z's went to Hamilton for a double-header exhibition, and Pendergrass and Bill West hooked up in a terrific duel.

Pendergrass put 21 Pistons down in a row, but West shut out Hamilton, too. In the eighth, Johnston got a single, and the Pistons barely escaped a no-hitter. A Hamilton homer put them ahead.

Hamilton came to Fort Wayne the next Sunday and Pendergrass beat them again with another 2-1 one-hitter. To prove it had not been a fluke, Hamilton won the second game; Wad Fannin came back with a 5-2 win over the Z's in the nightcap.

It was only the fourth time that the Pistons had lost a double-header in Zollner Stadium. Toledo, the Rochester (New York) Russers and Midland had been the only teams to win two in one night at the stadium.

Most of the players' wives came to the games, and occasionally children too. Although some did sit in the stands, they could also drive to the stadium and had the privilege of leaving their cars along the left field line. The families watched the game from the comfort of the front or back seat, softer than the bleachers.

Some of the players would join up, with their wives, for a beer and a sandwich after the game. A group always seemed to show up at Johnny Eshcoff's Rib Bar on South Calhoun Street.

After 22 games, the Zollners were 22-6 with outstanding performances by the longest-serving veterans Leo Luken (unbeaten on the mound) and Kampschmidt (hitting .341).

After the Hamilton embarrassment, the short-handed Pistons tightened their belts to win 26 of their next 27 games. They invited Hamilton back in July, beat that team handily, 8-0 and 6-4, then went to Hamilton and won 5-0. The second game was rained out.

It preserved the Z's record of never losing a season series to an opponent. They stood 4-3 against Hamilton and let it go at that.

Injuries to Bloomfield and Barille slowed the Pistons a little. Harry Hancock also took a 10-day break, to go back to Clearwater to claim his hometown bride.

There was no national industrial tournament planned for 1954 so Indianapolis was booked for the traditional Fourth of July fireworks-fastball twin bill. Some 4000 fans watched the Pistons win a pair, 4-1 and 9-0.

The only blemish in a fast-paced July was a 4-3 league loss to the Flint Buicks. It was the only NIFL loss of the season for the Pistons.

Their trophy case was bare. They had lost the NIFL playoff 1953 championship to Detroit in the opening game and had no current industrial tournament to contest. The Pistons wanted to take another shot at the ASA world's championship. Fred Zollner and Carl Bennett did not object, leaving the decision to the team.

This meant going through the state tournament (which they hosted and won) to qualify for the super regionals at LaCrosse, Wisconsin. Then they would go on to Minneapolis for the world's competition.

By beating Richmond in the state finals, the Zollners put the Indiana trophy in their case (Robitaille and Kampschmidt accepted from

State Commissioner Tony Dyer) and headed for LaCrosse. They took care of Louisville and LaCrosse, but stumbled to Mick Delaney and old NIFL rival Bloomington 2-0, to fall into the loser's bracket.

They got back into the finals by ousting another NIFL foe, Aurora, 7-1, then went to the finals against Bloomington again. This was a team they had handled eight out of 10 times during the season. Wayne Ward won his first ever game from the Z's 1-0. It knocked the Pistons out of contention for the world's tournament. The Clearwater Bombers won the 1954 crown, their second. The Bombers have continued their ASA tournament play through the years and have now won 10 world's titles (the most of any team), but never three in a row as the Pistons did in the mid-1940's.

The Piston bats were silenced at the wrong time. They had been enjoying their greatest offensive year, but now entered the first round of the NIFL playoffs against the Detroit Bombers. The Bombers bumped the Pistons out in two straight, 4-1 and 4-0, which gave the Pistons a record of being shut out in three of their last four games.

The 4-0 loss to Detroit was the season finale at Zollner Stadium.

The Pistons wound up with a 56-12 record. The team, batting a solid .270 was led by Ramage (.323); Johnston (.317); Jones (.303); Lombardo (.297); and Bloomfield (.281). Flowers had 12 homers, Palcheff 11. Luken, losing the last game at LaCrosse for his only defeat (9-1), led the pitchers and had won 17 straight over a two-year span, until the Bloomington defeat. Rohrs was 19-3; West 18-4 and Igou 10-4.

It turned out to be the last hurrah for the vaunted Z's. After all those years, Fred Zollner read the handwriting on the wall. The man who was the corporation and the sport's most zealous fan, and who had done everything in his power to make softball "major league", disbanded his team.

The reasons are not entirely clear, and everyone seems to have his own ideas. Bernie Kampschmidt says some of the players knew at the beginning of the season that this would be their last. As he said, it took some of the starch out. Also, the team was aging and the recent recruits, in his opinion, did not have the ability of the older players. Major changes would have been on the cards.

The team's long lifespan was one element of its greatness. Bill Johnston said, "The amazing thing about the team was the combination of players and their longevity. It was a remarkable feat that they stayed together so long." It said something not only about the players, but about Fred Zollner too.

In the September 22, 1954, Fort Wayne *News-Sentinel*, an eight column banner headline read: "Zollner Pistons Abandoning Softball, Dissolving Famous Team."

The story followed:

"The Zollner Pistons, one of the most famous sponsors in the history of softball, announced last night the dissolution of their record-breaking team.

"The announcement was made by Sponsor Fred Zollner who attributed a 'declining national interest in the sport' as the reason for abandoning the sport.

"Thus, the 'Yankees of softball' have been broken up.

"The move ends a 15-year cycle which saw the Zollner Club win every championship conceivable in softball or fastball, and establish some marks which may never be broken.

"The Pistons have had playing for them, or have played against every great player in the past two decades. At one stage of the club's fabulous history, Sponsor Zollner said he wouldn't trade any player at any one position for any other player in the country.

"Three of the players who helped build this softball dynasty were original members of the club and have played every season since the Pistons outgrew the ranks of local competition. They are manager Bernie Kampschmidt, Jim Ramage and pitcher Leo Luken, all of whom joined the Big Zs in 1940.

"Other 10, 11 and 12 year veterans who helped the Pistons pile up their amazing record of championships through the years include Hughie Johnston, Sam Lombardo, Ed Robitaille and Neal Barille. They were also on the club as it bowed out.

"Through the 15 years the Pistons have amassed 1253 victories against just 189 defeats, for a sensational winning percentage of .869; that's 8.7 games of every 10 they played against the strongest opposition in the land.

"The Z's have been as nearly 'big league' as any softball team ever has. They've played from the Atlantic ocean to Arizona and from Florida into Canada.

"Their record of winning three consecutive world's ASA tournaments has never been touched. With their entry into the National Softball League, which subsequently became the National Fastball League and more recently the National Industrial Fastball League, the Pistons never once finished below first place in regular season competition. That started in 1946 and continued through the past season — nine years' worth.

"Every goal the Pistons and their sponsors set out for was accomplished.

"In 1940, when they started, the dominant softball power was Bendix Brakes of South Bend. The first goal of the Z's was to conquer them. They did this within a season or two.

"The next goal became the world's ASA championship. This was achieved for the first time in 1945. En route the Z's wrapped up a couple of national industrial crowns.

"The world championships were repeated in 1946 and 1947. As competition deteriorated in the world's play and with the construction of Zollner Stadium, one of softball's brightest showcases, the Pistons abdicated their world's crowns to concentrate on building a strong midwestern league.

"Teams playing in ASA competition often close their parks in August to play in the tournaments and the building of Zollner Stadium prompted the Pistons to leave ASA tournament competition.

"The strength of the league which the Pistons helped build in the Midwest is evidenced by the fact that that seven world championships in the last nine years have been captured by league members. Only championships to escape were the 1949 crown (Toronto Tip Top Tailors) and 1950 (Clearwater, Fla., Bombers).

"The Pistons originally played their games at Municipal Beach and their free gates there attracted crowds which have been estimated upwards to 8,000-10,000. Later, they played at Dwenger Park, while awaiting the completion of Zollner Stadium.

"Sponsor Zollner built the Stadium as his team's schedule grew, to relieve the scheduling problems at municipal diamonds.

"In last night's announcement Zollner pointed out that the Stadium will still be used extensively for an expanded Knot Hole Gang program, professional wrestling and other diversified entertainment features. 'The Stadium schedule may be such that we can invite Little League and similar activities to play a portion of their schedules there,' he added.

"Many of the players are already fairly well set in their futures.

"All of them, naturally, have the opportunity of continuing to work at Zollner Machine Works with all the benefits their seniority will give them.' Zollner stated, 'but that will be up to each individual.'

"Ed Robitaille will be handling the Knot Hole Gang along with Bernie Kampschmidt. The latter also has extensive duties in the production office at the plant.

"Hughie Johnston owns his own tavern while Jack Bloomfield has been offered a contract by the Detroit Tigers. It's likely that Harry Hancock will enter the construction business with his brother in Clearwater, Fla., where he's also qualified as a teacher.

"Johnny Palcheff is a grade school principal in Madison, Illinois, and Luken is another production official at the Machine Works. The others may work at Zollners or try their softball futures elsewhere.

"This year the Pistons won 56 of 68 games and failed in their bid to enter the world's tournament in Minneapolis, which is currently in progress.

"Their best year, percentage-wise, was 1945 when they won 72 games and lost just four (.927). In five of the last seven years the Pistons have won more than 100 games a season, topped by 114 in 1949. In 1951 they had another amazing percentage of 101 wins, six defeats (.944).

"At one stage of his brilliant curve-balling career, Leo Luken won 53 straight pitching victories, believed to be unparalleled in softball. The team's offensive records of hitting .273 as a unit in 1951 and .270 this past season are marks of which offensive-minded baseball clubs could well be proud.

"In a game where home runs are exceptions rather than rules, Ernie Flowers once belted 20 in a season, another mark that is believed to be an all-time softball record. Another one which they'll all remember was the third base play of Ed Robitaille in 1945, when he went through 76 games with only one error.

"In coming to the final decision, Zollner said the policy he is adopting is becoming the trend with industrial powers all over the country.

He cited examples such as Eastmen Kodak of Rochester, N.Y.; South Bend's Bendix Brakes; New York's Grumman Aircraft; Pontiac's Big Six and later GMC Truck and Coach; Continental Motors of Muskegon, Mich.; Nash Motors of Kenosha, Wis.; and countless others who are diverting their one-team sponsorship programs into either intramural recreational programs or community efforts.

"The energies and efforts we have expended for softball in the past 15 years will now be channeled into different ideas of community progress, some phases of which we hope to announce shortly,' Zollner explained. 'I want to thank the fans for their loyal interest and believe they will approve our new community activities.

"In dissolving this team I cannot stress too strongly the de[e]p pride we have all taken in them. Every player who wore the Zollner uniform gave everything he had and was a credit, not only to us, but to the



The 1953 Zollner fastball team presented this superior pitching staff. L to R: Frank Harvey, Bill West, Elmer MacDonald, Leo Luken and Elmer Rohrs.

entire city of Fort Wayne and to the whole sports world. We've been represented handsomely by a group of very fine gentlemen — the greatest softball players that ever played the game."

The players faced the problem of what to do next. Those who could not play elsewhere tried their hand at business; some remained at the Zollner plant. Hughie Johnston said that one problem many faced was that the Zollner organization had not included a good retirement plan for the ball players.

The following season, Eddie Feighner brought his "King and his Court" show to Fort Wayne. He played the former Pistons, in a game organized by Bruff Cleary, a former minor-league umpire who had set up as a local entrepreneur. Feighner's foursome went against a full contingent of Z's brought together by Hughie Johnston. The Z's won 1-0, but the low score indicated the quality of the King's play.

Before the game, Eddie came to Hughie to say that he always played with a special ball, perhaps a little lighter. Hughie did not mind. Partway through the game, Eddie came to Hughie to say, "You know, we only play seven innings."

Hughie replied, "You'll stay till we're finished, then you'll get paid."

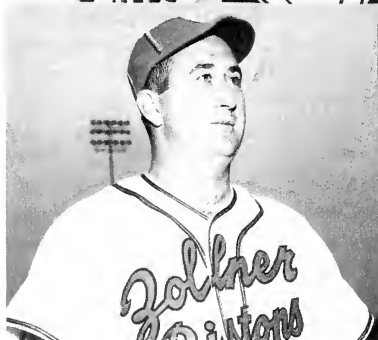
In a final outing, Smoky Montgomery arranged a game with the ex-Pistons at the state school. As Bernie Kampschmidt said, "He thought he could beat the old fogies, but we smoked 'em."

Perhaps we should leave the last word to one of the Fort Wayne fans who cared so deeply about their softball team. Don Graham said, "I became more aware after the fact. I never thought we were playing in big cities. I realized later it was amazing that we were challenging all the big money and the big cities. The reason was the Pistons had a powerhouse pitching staff. They didn't only play well once in a while. They did it night after night. The fact was, the Pistons were unbelievably good."

National Softball Hall of Fame

The following Fort Wayne Zollner Pistons are in the Softball Hall of Fame: Fred Zollner, Bernie Kampschmidt, Jim Ramage, Hughie Johnston, Clyde (Diz) Kirkendall, Bill West, Herb Dudley, Sam Lombardo, Elmer Rohrs and Leo Luken.

(overleaf) Zollner Piston players who are enshrined in the Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City are pictured in this montage: top, Bernie Kampschmidt, Jim Ramage; middle, Hughie Johnston, Leo Luken, Bill West; bottom, Diz Kirkendall, Elmer Rohrs..



Zollner Stadium

Fred Zollner built two softball diamonds in his career. The first was a lot at Kenwood and Crescent avenues in Fort Wayne in the mid-1930's as a place for the neighborhood kids to play ball. One day he rolled up in his Buick, unloaded nine bats, seven gloves and four regulation bases and the game was on. Writing for the Fort Wayne *Journal-Gazette* in 1947, Ray Scherer said, "It was the first time the kids had seen a collection like that outside of a Main Auto or Vim window."⁶ Then he would load up his team and zip them down to Huntington's LaFontaine Hotel for double chocolate malts and hamburgers with onions.

His second softball diamond was a palace for his world championship kings of the sport. This was Zollner Stadium.

During their climb to the ASA world's throne in 1945, the Pistons did not have a home field. As they advanced prestigously in the game, most of their games were played at Municipal Beach although some games were shuffled to Memorial or Dwenger Parks because of conflicts with the city recreational schedules.

When the Zollners rewarded their followers with the world's title, Fred started making plans for the perfect softball stadium as a home base and a showcase for the softball world he hoped to build.

Using his engineering techniques and softball expertise, Zollner and his associates designed the ultimate in stadium construction. The site was a 36-acre tract on North Anthony Boulevard in Fort Wayne, across the St. Joseph River from Municipal Beach, where the Z's had drawn their largest crowds.

Construction was announced January 12, 1946, and completion of the \$85,000 palace was planned for the start of the 1946 National Softball League season. A shortage of materials for the all-steel stands delayed the opening until May 30, 1947.

Ben Tenny, sports editor of the *News-Sentinel* wrote⁷: "Taking their lesson from the mistakes made in building other softball stadiums and profiting from the advanced ideas at some of these, Mr. Zollner and his aides planning the stadium believe the setup will be the Nation's finest. Patterned after, but highly improved, the Stadium will be slightly similar to the Lakewood, O., Elks Stadium where the National Tournament is being held. The Stadium will have a seating capacity of 5,000 and will be

⁶ Downtown sporting goods stores.

⁷ January 12, 1946

so arranged that the capacity can be expanded. The main grandstand, already ordered, will be all-steel construction and will seat 3,000. Set up from every safety, comfort and seeing ability standard, the grandstand will have wide redwood plank seats mounted firmly to the steel structure. Bleachers will be provided along the left and right field foul lines to provide 2,000 additional seats.

"The grandstand will be set 30 feet behind home plate, angling in a half-moon shape to 40 feet behind first and third bases. There will be 20 rows of seats and the first one will be high enough to give fans in it an excellent view. A four foot fence will inclose [sic] the outfield and will be about 230 feet from the home plate at the foul lines and about 250 feet in deep center field.

"...a public address system and an electric scoreboard, to be operated from a press box on top of and in the center of the grandstand will be installed."

The press box, located 23 feet from the ground over the main entrance, was designed for 15 scoring, reporting and announcing seats. Fastened to either end of the press box were two huge pistons, the largest cast aluminum pistons ever made, seven feet three inches in height and four feet three inches in diameter.

Eight 85-foot poles, holding 156 light-bulbs flood the field with 234,000 watts, the light being comparable to many major league baseball parks.

The infield and outfield both were skinned for reliably uniform playing conditions. The surface of the playing field was composed of two feet of clay, over a 12-foot bed on gravel inlaid with 5000 feet of tile. The "mile of tile" was to help ensure quick-drying playing conditions.

The main lobby was 35-by-90 feet with refreshment facilities and two trophy cases. The home team dressing room, locker and dugout were at the north end, and the visitors in the east. Between the lobby and locker rooms, under the stadium, were large storage areas and a refuge for fans in case of rain. The grandstand had no roof.

It was impressive. Even the fans realized it. As Stan Hood observed, "It was unlike anything we had seen in Fort Wayne. You have to put it in perspective."

Softball activities in Fort Wayne had always been for a free gate, but admissions were charged at Zollner Stadium to help defray some expenses in bringing in the league and top flight exhibitions.

Opening night was Memorial Day, May 30, 1947, with a double-header against the Pistons' arch-rival, Midland Dow Chemicals. Dedi-

cation hoopla, including fireworks, drew an estimated 5000-6000 fans, overflowing the extra bleachers and selling out the 2804 seats in the grandstand.

Sam Lombardo had the distinction of getting Zollners' first hit in the Stadium (in the second inning) and also scoring the Z's first run in the extra-inning eighth, beating out a hopper in front of Midland's Johnny Pavoris and then getting the game winner (1-0) in a Curly Armstrong hit.

Midland's Roy Weaver had the honor of hitting the first one out of the park in the fourth inning of the second game, which the Pistons won, 5-2.

The home run distances (230 feet at the foul poles and 260 feet in center) were considered a fair test for the fence busters. Heavy hitting Hughie Johnston got the first Piston homer in the park and chided Zollner: "Don't you think those fences are a little too far out?" In typical Fred-fashion, Zollner replied, "If you can't hit `em over, I'll get somebody in here who can."

After Zollner Machine Works' gradual exit from the Fort Wayne sports scene in the late 1950's, Zollner made a generous deal with Concordia High School. Today, the Zollner Stadium still stands, a monument to the world's greatest softball team, and now the home athletic field for the Concordia Cadets.

When Fred started his "Field of Dreams" project, the Pistons had their first world championship. Because of the delayed construction, they had their second when the Stadium was opened and then brought home their third during the Stadium's first year of existence.

Pistons Basketball

1941

The night was February 26, 1941. It seemed like an insignificant happening on the city's basketball calendar, but it may have been the most momentous night in Fort Wayne basketball history.

The newspapers treated it with routine coverage. There was no radio report. The game was sandwiched in a triple-header at the General Electric Company Gym as the Zollner Pistons, YMCA Industrial League champions, met International Harvester in a playoff game to determine who the Fort Wayne entry in the upcoming world's pro tournament at Chicago's Amphitheater would be.

The paper reported: "The 2,000 fans present were treated to a triple basketball attraction for the invitational night program." It did not say whether or not the 2,000 fans were there to watch the Pistons play the Harvesters, Greiner Garage play the Main Office or the General Electric Industrials play the Miami Redskins.

Nobody is sure that the GE Club could accommodate 2,000 fans for basketball, but that was the start of it.

The single column headline in the Thursday, February 27, 1941 *Journal-Gazette* was:

PISTONS DOWN
HARVESTERS IN
OVERTIME TILT

To Vie In Chicago Pro
Meet; Miami Team
Nips G.E. Five

Neither the Pistons nor Harvester were pro teams so it was both a tribute to the caliber of Hoosier-style basketball and the shaky stability of pro play at the time. The National Basketball League continued to survive but there were continual sponsor changes, and sports in general were reeling from the Depression.

Fort Wayne had had its last team in the NBL in 1937-38, but General Electric dropped its sponsorship after one season.

There is little doubt that Fred Zollner's "quest for the best" attitude would have sustained his sports ambitions beyond local competition, but the 37-35 win over Harvester hurried the program along.

The Pistons barely squeaked by Harvester. They trailed at all stops, 13-9 at the half and 27-17 at the end of the third quarter. But they rallied to tie the game at 31 to send it into overtime.

The Piston lineup for the game included Red Oberbrunner, Dale Hamilton, Hans Dienelt, Jack Keller, Jim Hilgeman (captain), Johnny Shaffer, Don Beery and George (Red) Gatton. Hamilton and Dienelt, with nine points each, led the Pistons while Bob Irons had 14 and Bob Bolyard 11 for Harvester.

It was almost ironic, or coincidental, that the following Monday the famous basketball tourists, the New York Celtics, would be playing the Indianapolis Kautskys in an exhibition at the Fort Wayne Armory. The Celtics had Davey Banks as coach and players Bobby McDermott, Nat Hickey, Pat Herlihy, Bill Resnick and Paul Birch on their roster.

Buoyed by their invitation to the pro tournament and the train trip to Chicago, the Pistons beefed up their team by adding Irons and Jim Glass to their roster for their shot at the pros. They also booked an exhibition against the barnstorming Indiana University All-Stars, the Hoosiers' graduating seniors.

The Big Red Machine should have given the Pistons second thoughts about turning pro. In a shoot-out at North Side Gym, some 2,000 fans saw the Hoosiers wipe the Pistons 63-33. Indiana's lineup included three from Fort Wayne (Herm Schaefer, Tom Motter and Curly Armstrong), Jay McCreary and the Menke brothers.

The Pistons drained their bench of 11 players. Schaefer's 15 and Motter's 14 led the scoring while Hilgeman was high for the Zollners with 11. But it was not a good sendoff for the Chicago tournament.

Despite its long history dating back to Naismith, basketball was in its infancy. The NCAA tournament did not start until 1939. It struggled for teams to compete when Indiana won in 1940; the center jump was eliminated in the late 1930's. It had a lot of growing to do. That's why there was so little differential between the professionals, independents and collegians.

The Chicago tournament, determining the world's pro champion, was a 16-team affair. Competing with the Pistons in 1941 were the Harlem Globetrotters; Chicago Bruins (owned by George Halas of Bears fame); Detroit Eagles; Indianapolis Kautskys; Newark (New Jersey) Elks; Oshkosh All-Stars; New York Rens; Dayton Suchers; Rochester (New

York) Seagrams (later the Royals); Kenosha (Wisconsin) Royals; Sheboygan Redskins; Toledo White Huts; Philadelphia Hebrews, and teams from Davenport, Iowa, and Bismarck, North Dakota.

The tournament was single elimination, games played every hour on the hour. The tournament was the brainchild of Leo Fischer, sports editor of the Chicago *Herald-American*, who also doubled as president of the National Basketball League.

The plum perk of the tournament was that the champion hosted the College All-Stars the following fall to kickoff next season's basketball campaign. It was the *Herald-American's* answer to the Arch-Ward *Chicago Tribune's* all-star college football and major league baseball all-star games.

The Pistons drew Lon Darling's Oshkosh All-Stars for the first game. Oshkosh had just won the National League championship by three games over Sheboygan and the Akron Firestones. It was a quick knock-out, but the Pistons were credible in the loss; only 47-41.

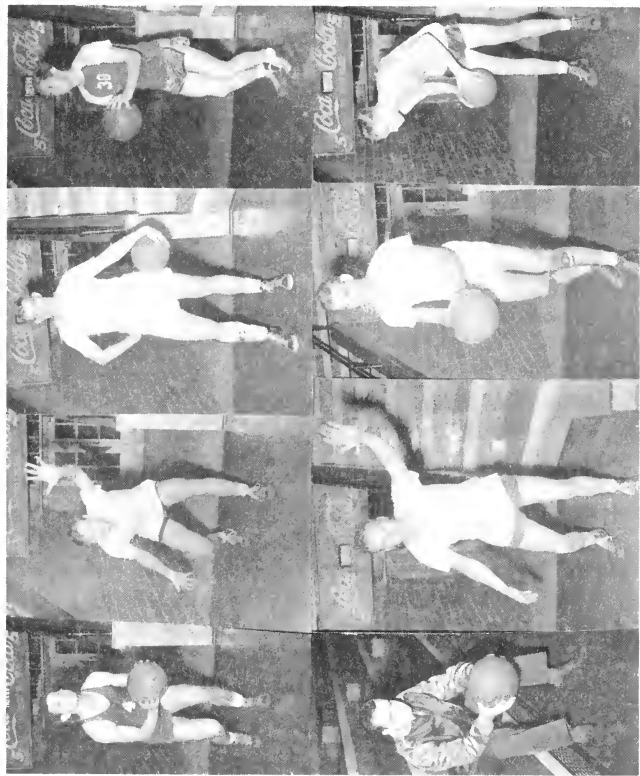
The Detroit Eagles zoomed by the Harlem Globetrotters and the New York Rens to upset Oshkosh, 39-37, for the championship. The Eagles' roster included such names as Bob Calihan, Ed Sadowski, Buddy Jeannette, and Rusty Saunders.

The Pistons, just two weeks out of the YMCA Industrial League, found themselves at the same competitive level as some of the best pro names in the business. Oshkosh had the fabled Leroy (Cowboy) Edwards, Bob Carpenter and Charlie Shipp. Sheboygan had Ed Dancker; Jerry Bush was a sub for the Akron Firestone Non-Skids; Halas' Bruins had Bill Hapac, Mike Novak, Stan Szukala and Ralph Vaughn; the Akron Good-years had Marv Huffman, Jake Pelkington and Steve Sitko. Making his first foray into pro ball was Carlisle (Blackie) Towery, who played this one outing with the Kautskys on the condition that it would not jeopardize his signing with anyone else.

The team lists of the Pistons' opponents at this tournament were filled with names that would one day wear a Piston uniform.

With depression clouds behind and World War II ahead, professional basketball was in considerable disarray. The Chicago experience whetted Fred Zollner's appetite. Zollner was moving in the same pattern he had in softball — pulling away from local competition and exploring what was beyond. The Zollners were looking for bigger fish to fry.

Participating at the pro tournament level helped with the decisions. Leo Fisher's National League seemed to shuffle franchises as



Zollner Piston basketball, 1940-41, NBL member. Top L to R: Curly Armstrong, Don Beery, Dale Hamilton, Jim Hilgeman. Bottom L to R: coach-manager Carl Bennett, Red Oberbrunner, Elmer Gainer, Jack Keller.

fast as players. In addition, the impending war was to make further demands on sponsors and players.

After the tournament concluded, Zollner dispatched his manager, Carl Bennett, and newly-signed player-coach Herm Schaefer to Chicago to talk about a bigger exhibition schedule with National League teams and other pro tourists. Fischer followed Bennett and Schaefer back to Fort Wayne with a better idea: join the league.

This solution made Zollner more respectable and lessened the problems he might have with his opponents. From Fischer's point of view, it provided a better class of sponsor when he needed one.

Carl Bennett was named as manager and Herman Schaefer as playing captain and coach. Schaefer was a former star of the Central High School squad and had shone with the Indiana University all-stars. He had recently been featured with a photograph in the *News-Sentinel*. The surprising thing about his being the player-coach was that he was fresh from college and only twenty-two years old.

Prior to moving into the NBL, the Pistons had strengthened their team by signing Armstrong (Schaefer's teammate) and Carlisle (Blackie) Towery, "the six-foot-six-inch center who was All-American pivotman at Western Kentucky Teachers College and the player who stole the show in the collegiate meet in Indianapolis in 1940 (NCAA)." Bud Jeannette described him as "a big guy who could really give you the ball."

Schaefer had seen Towery play and talked to him about going to Fort Wayne. Towery hitchhiked from Kentucky to Bloomington, met Schaefer and the two went to Fort Wayne. They talked to Fred Zollner and both signed.

Others invited for the October 15 tryouts included Dale Hamilton, Oberbrunner, Beery, Gatton, Hilgeman, John Shaffer, Phil Bail, Dienelt, Marv Maderich and Joe Grimme.

1941-42

Three dropouts and three replacements left the National League with seven members for 1941-42. The Akron Firestones and the Hammond Ciesar All-Americans dropped out, while the Detroit Eagles opted to play independent ball. The Pistons, Indianapolis Kautskys and the Toledo Jim White Chevrolets filled the gaps with returnees Oshkosh, Sheboygan, Akron Goodyears and the Chicago Bruins.

The first game the Pistons played as professionals was an exhibition at Marion, Indiana, against an independent team called the Hoosier Comets. Zollners won 33-28. Elmer Gainer, a six-foot-six star from DePaul University had been added to the club; Blackie Towery was out with an injury; Armstrong and Schaefer led the scoring, and other holdovers, Hamilton, Keller, Oberbrunner and Hilgeman played.

Prior to their NBL opener December 1 against the Chicago Bruins at North Side High School Gym in Fort Wayne, the Z's walloped Toledo, 66-38, at Berne, Indiana. It was their first test against an NBL foe. Toledo featured Chuck Chuckovits, an All-American from Toledo University, who would lead the league in scoring with a then-unbelievable 18.5 points per-game average.

The league opener (Fort Wayne's first official game in organized pro play) was set for Monday, December 1, 1941, at North Side Gym, where the Pistons hosted the Chicago Bruins, owned by the National Football League's George (Papa Bear) Halas. The Bruins featured third-year star, six-foot-nine Mike Novak, the league's tallest, and had picked up All-American Ralph Vaughn from the defunct Hammond club. Vaughn starred at the Frankfort, Indiana, High School and then went to Southern California.

Chicago had finished 11-13 the previous year and missed the playoffs. An estimated 2500 fans showed up to see the launching. The Piston nucleus was comprised of Armstrong, Schaefer, Towery, Elmer Gainer and Jim Hilgeman or Dale Hamilton.

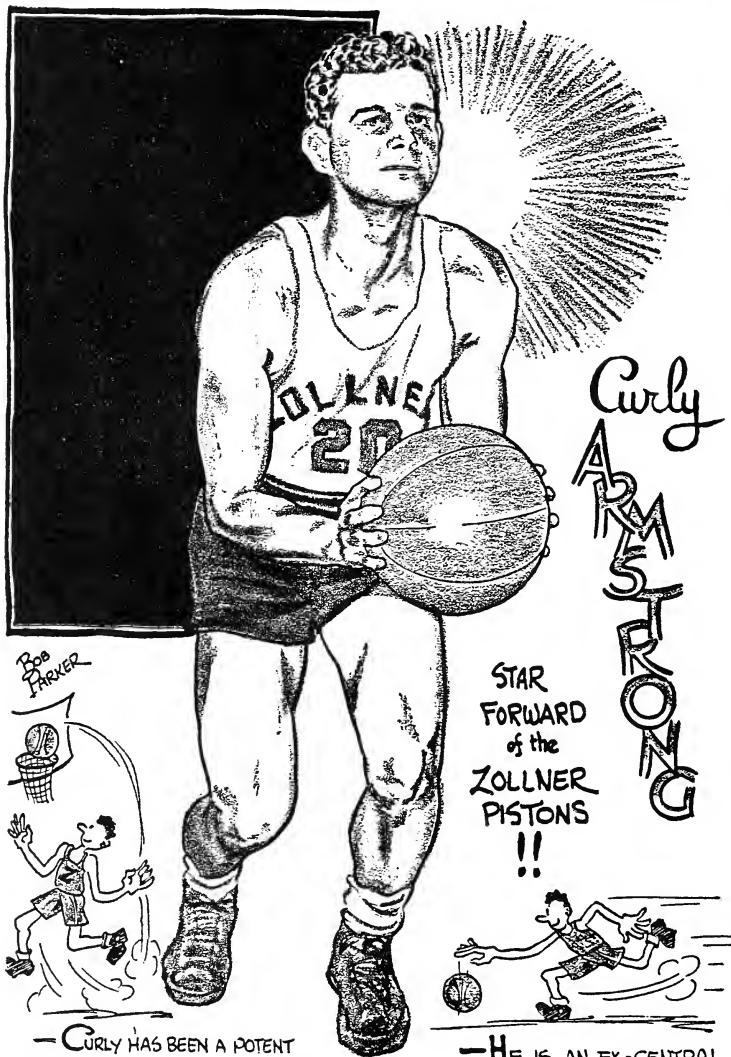
The Pistons prevailed for a hard-fought 48-46 win after trailing 25-23 at the half. Wibs Kautz led Chicago with 16; Vaughn and Novak had eight while Armstrong and Towery had 11 each for the Zollners. The Pistons were leading the league after their first start.

After beating the Bruins, the Pistons went to Anderson and lost a league game to the Indianapolis Kautskys. The Kautskys had a lineup that included Bob Dietz, Scotty Armstrong, Michigan's Johnny Townsend, Jewell Young and Bob Dro of Indiana University, who had considered playing with the Pistons.

The next week Fred Zollner surprised the basketball world by signing the biggest name in the pro sport, Bobby McDermott. Following the pattern he had established in softball a year before when he grabbed three stars from Covington's world champs, Zollner plucked McDermott from the New York Celtics, the game's most revered team.

It was a perfect fit for the Pistons and McDermott. After winning their opener, the Pistons had dropped two. Three games into the season

Fort Wayne Gallery Of Sport



Curly
ARMSTRONG

STAR
FORWARD
of the
ZOLLNER
PISTONS
!!

— CURLY HAS BEEN A POTENT
FACTOR THUS FAR IN THE
SUCCESS OF THE PISTONS — SOME
OF HIS SCORING HAS BEEN SENSATIONAL!

— HE IS AN EX-CENTRAL
STAR, NEEDING NO IN-
DUCTION TO LOCAL FANS

they knew they needed help. McDermott, tiring of the nomadic life of the touring Celtics, was anxious to settle down. Friendly Fort Wayne and Friendly Fred were the answers.

The story in the Fort Wayne *News-Sentinel* on December 15 said:

"Bob McDermott, recognized as 'Mr. Basketball' for the past few seasons, today signed a contract to play with the Fort Wayne Zollner Pistons for the remainder of the 1941-42 campaign and probably as long as he continues to be a topnotch player. The former New York Celtic and Brooklyn Visitation player, generally recognized as the best individual player on the hardwood sport for quite some time, will make his first appearance in a Fort Wayne uniform Tuesday night at North Side Gym when the Pistons take on the Sheboygan Redskins in their fourth NBL battle.

"McDermott, who has appeared here often as a Celtic star, will become a regular employee of the Piston firm.... He plans to move his wife and two sons, aged six and two, to this city in January and will make his home here the year around. It was his desire and that of his wife to make a permanent home for their youngsters and get away from the nearly six-month, night-after-night traveling the Celts undergo as well as to establish himself in an all-around position... He signed early today and will practice with the Pistons tonight, taking up regular employment with the firm Tuesday.

"McDermott, now only 26 years old, has been a professional basketball star for nine years. He joined the Brooklyn five in the American Basketball League upon his graduation from Flushing, New York, High and led that league in scoring for four seasons. He has been with the Celts for the past five seasons, and always has been their high scorer, establishing a number of brilliant marks....

"He has experience and coolness galore and is one of, if not the best, long shots in the game. McDermott, five feet 11 inches and weighing around 170 pounds, will advise Player-Coach Herm Schaefer and Manager Carl Bennett on matters of strategy....

"The Pistons...looked good in their first two games but were a rather disorganized outfit last week against Akron.... Always a favorite with fans here despite the fact that he wore a Celt uniform, McDermott probably will boost the Fort Wayne club's following a lot and help in the sponsor's ambition to give fans here a really capable club to back this and future seasons.

"McDermott's best known basketball feats were the scoring of 56 points for the Celts in one game at Atlanta, Ga., two seasons ago and

another game he connected on 11 straight shots from way out and also flipped 14 charity shots in a row while getting those fielders.

"He and Curly Armstrong are expected to team as forwards, Carly[]e Towery the center and Elmer Gainer and Schaefer the guards. That will leave Oberbrunner, Hamilton and Keller doing most of the relief work..."

Three games and two weeks into the season, Fred Zollner had sent his signal that he meant business, and it started to boom right away.

Mac's arrival started the Pistons into a five game winning streak that got them into the race. The defending champion Oshkosh All-Stars were the powerhouse. They were anchored by Cowboy Edwards, a University of Kentucky dropout, who was only six-foot-four but was considered the giant of the league's pivotmen and perennial scoring leader. He was flanked by Lou Barle, Connie Mack Berry, who doubled in pro football, the rugged Charlie Shipp, Gene Englund and Bill Komenich.

The Pistons had tried to strengthen themselves further when the Detroit Eagles opted to go independent rather than stay in the NBL. They signed Detroit star Bob Calihan, later a coach at Detroit University. He got into Uncle Sam's khaki before he could play in a Zollner suit. The Eagles kept Buddy Jeannette; signed Jerry Bush from the defunct Akron Goodyear Non Skids and lost Big Ed Sadowski to Wilmington in the American League.

Blackie Towery laughs now about the the fact that he was the only southern boy on the team then. The pace of life in Fort Wayne was faster than he was used to or liked, and "I wasn't used to being pushed so much." Also, "they were not used to my way of talking. They'd ask me to do something and I'd say, 'I don't mind,' meaning I would, but they'd think I wouldn't."

In retrospect, Fred Zollner gains another unique spot in basketball history, because he kept the players' financial interests to the fore. He ensured that the compensation they received was enough. He was not alone in offering his players jobs in his factory, but he added another incentive. If there were more basketball receipts than expenses, he put the money in a communal pot. When the season was over, the money was divided among the players. Buddy Jeannette spoke highly of this system. Blackie Towery confirmed, "Mr. Zollner was very liberal. Every ball player that ever played wanted to come to Fort Wayne after they heard that deal."

This was another reason why the best players were interested in playing in the smallest city in league, even if it was off the beaten track.⁸

The league schedule was for 24 games, 12 at home and 12 on the road. The Pistons called North Side home, but had to play some games at New Haven. There were plenty of exhibition games. The top four teams made the playoffs using the Shaughnessy system, first place against fourth, second against third.

After McDermott gave the Pistons their first jumpstart, the league settled down to Oshkosh leading all the way and a three-way battle between the Pistons, Akron Goodyears and Indianapolis. Six-foot-eight George Glamack, the "blind bomber" from North Carolina, had solidified Akron into a good ball club along with veteran Ben Stephens, Rudy Debner, Gene Anderson, Floyd Ebaugh and Howard Vocke.

Glamack, who wore glasses and suffered from acute nearsightedness, developed a powerful hook shot which his opponents said he "shot from memory."

The Toledo Jim White Chevrolets, grossly underfinanced, were hoping for a lightning strike by building their entire team around the high scoring Chuckovits. It turned out to be a disaster as they only won three games all season (one by forfeit).

The report was that Jim White had the sponsorship because he gave them two station wagons for transportation and bought the uniforms. Promoter Sid Goldberg was reported to have borrowed uniforms the previous year for the pro tournament from an early loser in the bracketing, the Rochester Seagrams.

Hoping for a Chuckovits miracle, he got an NBL franchise for \$350 for 1941-42. Chuckovits led the league in scoring with 406 points, but became discouraged enough that he did not play pro ball anymore. During the season at least one Toledo game was postponed for lack of a hall in which to play.

After their 6-2 start, things leveled off for the Pistons and after two-thirds of the season, they were tied for third with Indianapolis at 9-7. At this point, McDermott convinced his Celtic teammate, Paul (Polly) Birch, of the good happenings in Fort Wayne and the former Duquesne All-American joined the Z's for the stretch drive.

Birch gave the Pistons their second jumpstart. The Pistons won six of their last eight games to tie Akron for second in the standings with 15-9 records. Oshkosh was 20-4; Indianapolis 12-11; Sheboygan 10-14;

⁸ Robert W Peterson, *Cages to Jump Shots*, p 135-6

Chicago 8-15; and Toledo 3-21. The last Indianapolis-Chicago game was canceled since it would not affect the final standings.

The Pistons lost the first playoff game at Akron, 46-30, but came back to win the clinchers, 51-48 and 49-43 at home, and to qualify for the two-of-three championship series against Oshkosh. The All-Stars had polished off Indianapolis 40-33 at home and 64-48 at Indianapolis.

Home court was the prevalent advantage in all the playoff games except Oshkosh's win at Indianapolis. The Zollners won the first playoff in Fort Wayne 61-43 despite Cowboy Edwards' 22 points. McDermott had 20 for the Z's.

The next game, at Oshkosh, found Edwards pouring in 35 points in the 68-60 All-Star win. In the championship game, Fort Wayne put a defensive fence around Edwards, holding him to a single point, but the rest of the All-Stars scored enough to win the championship by a score of 52-46.

It was a good, decent start for the Pistons in their pro experience. The additions of McDermott and Birch were steps up the ladder. Towery emphasized how well they played together. "Birch would block for the outside shot. Bobby would come behind him — you couldn't get past Birch. Rack up two!"

McDermott, with 277 points, was the second best scorer in the league. Five of the Pistons scored 100 or more points; the others were Schaefer (207), Armstrong (198), Towery (163), and Elmer Gainer (100).

Red Oberbrunner got in 19 of the 24 games; Jack Keller 18; Dale Hamilton 16; Don Beery 11; and Jim Hilgeman played just four, returning to the reserve squad after the arrival of Mc-Dermott. All the players participated in the playoffs, McDermott scoring 72 points in the six games and Armstrong 71.

The Pistons lost out early in the world's pro tournament. Oshkosh won by sweeping the Rens, Globetrotters and the defending champion Detroit Eagles. The break-up of the independent Eagles appeared imminent, something that would not escape the eyes of Fred Zollner, Carl Bennett and Bobby McDermott.

1942-43

When Carl Bennett came back from the organizational meeting for the 1942-43 campaign, all he could report was that the league would function with five teams for certain and possibly six.

The Akron Goodyears, tied for second with the Pistons in the previous campaign, decided to return to amateur ball. Frank Kautsky thought it best that his Indianapolis team take a leave of absence because of heavy inroads on player personnel by calls to military service.

George Halas, discouraged by his team's 41-42 showing, decided not to sponsor the Bruins. But the Chicago Studebaker plant had been converted to wartime production and with help from the United Auto Workers Union decided to sponsor the franchise. It was probably the only time Fred Zollner felt friendly toward a union.

It also was the first move to break the color barrier in organized basketball. There had been other black teams, but all were independents, barnstormers like the Globetrotters, New York Rens and Washington Generals.

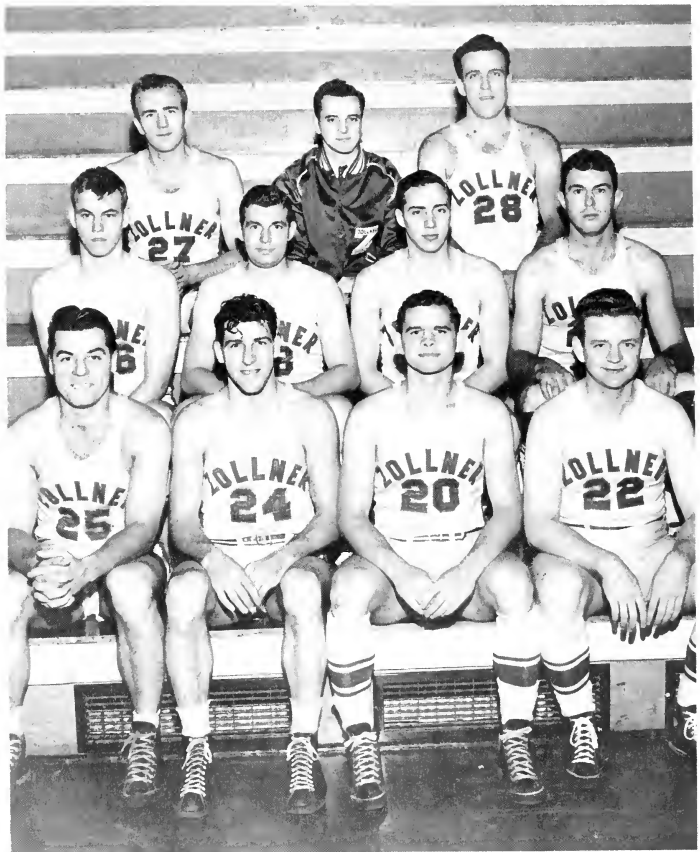
But from the Bruins, Big Mike Novak and Dick Evans, Paul Sodoky from Sheboygan and a host of Globetrotters found work at the Studebaker plant. Fort Wayne, Oshkosh, Sheboygan and the Toledo Jim White Chevrolets were the remnants to start the 1942-43 season.

As Robert Peterson points out in his *Cages to Jump Shots*: "During the war, Zollner's company was making pistons for military aircraft and heavy equipment, and so the players, as employees of a defense plant, were not drafted into service. While other NBL rosters were decimated by the draft, the Pistons lost very few players."⁹

The Zollners had strengthened their ranks with the signing of pro veterans Jerry Bush and John (Jake) Pelkington. Both had been with the Eagles. Bush played college ball at St. John's while Pelkington's alma mater was Manhattan, so more of the McDermott Eastern flavor was melding in. Also signed was a promising rookie, Gus Doerner of Evansville.

The Pistons started their October practices with McDermott, Schaefer, Armstrong, Bush, Pelkington, Birch, Doerner, Towery, Jack Keller and Dale Hamilton. From the original YMCA Industrial champs that played in the 1941 world's tournament, only Hamilton and Keller remained.

⁹ p.136.



Piston basketball squad, 1942-43. Front L to R: Paul Birch, Bob McDermott, Curly Armstrong, Herman Schaefer. Middle L to R: Jack Keller, Dale Hamilton, Gus Doerner, Carlisle Towery. Back L to R: Jerry Bush, coach Carl Bennett, John Pelkington

Detroit's leader, Buddy Jeannette, had escaped the Zollner lure and was working in a defense plant in Rochester, New York. He was playing for Les Harrison's independent Seagrams-Eber team.

The Pistons were a rock-solid, old-pro-style, play-set ball club. The burden fell to basically seven players: Towery, Birch, Bush, Armstrong, McDermott, Pelkington and Schaefer, with Dale Hamilton as the major reliever. Keller, three years out of high school, appeared in only nine games. Doerner missed most of the season with injuries.

The season opened with the traditional Pro-College All Star game in Chicago. The collegians beat Oshkosh, and the Pistons (playing in the other half of the double-header) beat Camp Grant in an exhibition. Receipts went to the Red Cross.

Chicago again provided the NBL opener December 1. The Studebakers, anchored by six foot-nine Novak and, with a lot of ex-Globe-trotters (Duke Cumberland, Bernie Price, Sonny Boswell, Rosie Hudson), gave the Pistons a rude awakening at North Side with a seven-point win.

They split a road trip with Oshkosh and Sheboygan and then whipped the Toledo Chevrolets, 70-51. Toledo had high hopes with Toledo University's All-American Bob Gerber and the acquisition of veteran Jewell Young, but after Gerber scored 22 points in his first game, he was drafted and the franchise folded after four games. Gerber had a 22-point-per game average!

By the halfway mark in the season, the Pistons had started to roll. After their 2-2 start, they won seven of their next nine and atoned for that home loss to the Chicago Studebakers by beating them 46-38 on their January 5 date at North Side.

The League had only four teams left. All would be in the playoffs, so it was a scramble for position and home court advantage. The title of "coach" was also a curiosity. With the Pistons it seemed more like a committee.

Schaefer was originally designated player-coach and Bennett, manager. Manager meant doing everything else: scheduling, selling tickets, negotiating contracts, handling equipment and travel. Bennett is listed in some basketball history books as the coach, as the other business managers were: Lon Darling of Oshkosh, Carl Roth of Sheboygan, Sid Goldberg of Toledo and later, Les Harrison of Rochester.

Some memoirs say "coaches McDermott and Armstrong." When McDermott was signed, he was to help plot strategy with Schaefer and Bennett. Bennett was always on the bench and had the authority to make substitutions.

Blackie Towery later observed, "Bobby McDermott ran the ball club. What Bobby wanted, Mr. Zollner bought. Bobby brought all these players. You'd be surprised how many people came to see McDermott play. They'd come in. They'd just keep coming to see McDermott play." Whatever it took, it worked, because by mid-season, the Pistons were in first place in the NBL for the first time.

The Z's finished strong, too, and won the regular league championship 17-6, five games ahead of Sheboygan, and six in front of the defending champs, Oshkosh. The Redskins had beefed up for their stretch run by signing Jeannette for the final four crucial games in the season for \$500 a game.

It seemed only fitting that the Pistons would clinch their first league championship at Oshkosh. They were the team that had denied them the title in the past. The clincher was deemed important enough that the game was broadcast back to Fort Wayne from Oshkosh February 9, with the Pistons winning, 47-44.

Bush had one of his better nights with 16 points while Armstrong and Pelkington had super showings. McDermott, banged up from an injury suffered against Chicago, saw only part-time service.

Going into the playoffs, the Pistons were heavy favorites with their strong team and home court advantage. The inspiration of Jeannette had fired up Sheboygan as he averaged more than 15 points in the final four games. He then led them to polish off Oshkosh in two straight games in the playoffs.

The Pistons beat Chicago in the first game at North Side, 49-37, but then played a ho-hum game at Chicago's DuSable High Gym and lost 45-32 to the Studebakers. Back at North Side, the Z's made the Championship round by knocking out Chicago, 44-32.

The championship playoff was a two out of three game match against Sheboygan at North Side. In the first game the Pistons jumped to a 27-21 halftime lead, but the Redskins rallied and grabbed a 55-50 win. Back at Sheboygan, with their backs against the wall, the Pistons led 44-42 but a Jeannette long shot at the buzzer sent the game into overtime, 44 all.

Two baskets by Armstrong, another by Towery gave the Pistons a 50-45 overtime win, and they came back to Fort Wayne. There on Tuesday night, March 9, perhaps the biggest barnburner in Fort Wayne pro history erupted.

Let Bob Reed of the Fort Wayne *Journal-Gazette* tell it:

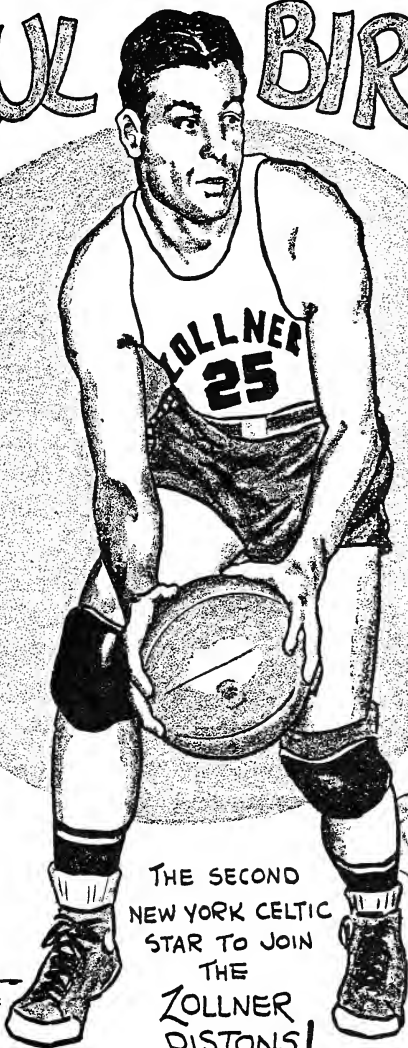
Fort Wayne Gallery Of Sport

PAUL BIRCH

Bob
FARKER



—AS A DUQUESNE STAR, PAUL WAS VOTED THE BEST PLAYER TO APPEAR IN MADISON SQUARE GARDEN IN 1935—



THE SECOND
NEW YORK CELTIC
STAR TO JOIN
THE
ZOLLNER
PISTONS!

I
COVER
'EM
LIKE A
BLANKET



HE IS A
FINE DEFENSIVE
PLAYER AND AN
EXPERT AT
SETTING UP PLAYS!

"In a wild and almost unbelievable finish, the Zollner Pistons lost the deciding game of their playoff series with Sheboygan last night before more than 3500 slightly hysterical fans at North Side.

"The score was 30 to 29. With seven seconds remaining to play and the Pistons apparently winners in spite of a series of bad breaks, Ed Dancker, lanky center of the Redskins, took a desperate one-handed toss over his head from a spot in the corner of the floor. The ball hit the backboard, dropped through the net and the ball game was over, one of the most nerve-racking battles ever staged on a Fort Wayne court. It decided the Naismith Cup, awarded to the National league playoff winner, although the Pistons were the league champions over the regular schedule.

"...When Curly Armstrong dropped in a free throw with the count at 28-all it looked as if the ball game was won, especially when Rube Lautenschlager fouled with 35 seconds to play....

"As the final gun sounded, irate fans swarmed over the floor, charging Umpire Jim Enright and the portly official from Chicago had great difficulty getting to his dressing room.

"Fans were incensed by decisions made during the course of the evening by Enright and Messenger. As things wound up the ball game was really decided, not by Dancker's fling in the last few seconds but by a technical decision in a split second at the end of the first half....

"As the first half ended Armstrong got loose under the basket. He took a fling from underneath and the ball went in just as the timer's horn sounded. Enright was between the play and the timer and as the ball went through the net he nodded emphatically that the goal should count.

"Later, in a conference with Messenger and the timekeepers, he weakened and disallowed the basket. Whether he was right or wrong in the first place, his immediate decision was so apparent that the fans could hardly be blamed for getting a little wild when they remembered the reversed decision finally decided the ball game...."

The officials, with a police escort, had to hide in the principal's office until the crowd cleared out.

The scene was not as hectic when, two nights later the Pistons beat the League All-Stars, 49-47. McDermott led the league in scoring with 314 points and made the first team, along with Armstrong, and Bush made the second.

One thing for certain: Jeannette was on Zollners' wish list.

Another last-second long shot by veteran Charlie Shipp knocked Fort Wayne out of the pro-tournament semifinals against Oshkosh, 40-39. The Pistons had beaten the Indianapolis Oilers, 57-52, and avenged

Sheboygan, 48-40 in the quarter-finals. The Pistons' Armstrong was named the tournament's Most Valuable Player. After the tournament, which the Rens won by beating Oshkosh, 43-31, Curly Armstrong shipped out for the Navy. Schaefer also was called into service at Great Lakes.

To replace them, the Pistons filled their wish list by signing Jeannette and veteran pro star Chick Reiser for a trip through the East. In a game billed as the "world's all-league championship game" the Pistons beat the Sphas at Philadelphia, 47-41.

The world pro tournament champion Rens, now playing as the Washington Bears, were next and in two slugfests in Washington, the teams split the results. The Pistons broke Washington's 46-game winning streak in the first game, 27-20, but lost the second, 38-22.

The three-game series moved on to New York, where one of McDermott's patented high-arching long shots in the closing seconds sealed a 62-60 result, making it a best two out of three decision for Fort Wayne. Except for the wild Sheboygan win in the NBL playoffs and Shipp's buzzer-beater in Chicago, the Pistons truly had their greatest season yet.

1943-44

The blueprint for the world's best pro basketball team was still on the drawing board. The architect, Fred Zollner, was still trying to finish the masterpiece, player by player.

Uncle Sam had been lenient until the pro tourney and then enlisted Curly Armstrong and Herm Schaefer into the Navy. They were two of the building blocks in the beginning. Both had always called Fort Wayne home.

It was almost company policy for those who played well against the Pistons to apply for a job. Buddy Jeannette who helped maneuver Sheboygan into its playoff championship, had solid credentials. After he left college at Washington and Lee, he played for the Detroit Eagles, Rochester Seagrams (later the Royals) and then the Redskins before starting the season-ending tour with the Pistons.

Jerry Bush and John Pelkington, who had joined the Pistons a year earlier, urged Jeannette to move to Fort Wayne. Not only was the team an attraction, the jobs offered at the piston plant meant security and good money. Jeannette said Zollner "had a pretty good deal." He made the

jump and later observed, "Of all the moves I made, the one to Fort Wayne was the best."

Another attempt to fill the Armstrong-Schaefer gap was Chick Reiser, who had played impressively with the Brooklyn Eagles in the world's tournament. He played at the Pratt Institute in New York and was the toast of the American Basketball League.

It was a neat fit and gave Zollner a solid seven-man nucleus to seek the gold that had escaped in 1943.

The professionals at the time were accustomed to eight or nine-man squads, and there were 12 to answer the first practice bell at the New Haven gym in mid-October. Paul Kessy, of Milwaukee State Teachers College, and Vern Yates, of Oklahoma A. and M., sought tryouts, and Elmer Gainer, after his service stint, returned to try his luck again.

With Schaefer and Armstrong in the Navy, only Blackie Towery and Dale Hamilton remained from the original NBL entrant two years before. Evansville's Gus Doerner came back after his injury-ridden year, but was soon inducted into the service. Eight players survived the final cut: Bush, Towery, Pelkington, Jeannette, McDermott, Reiser, Birch and Dale Hamilton.

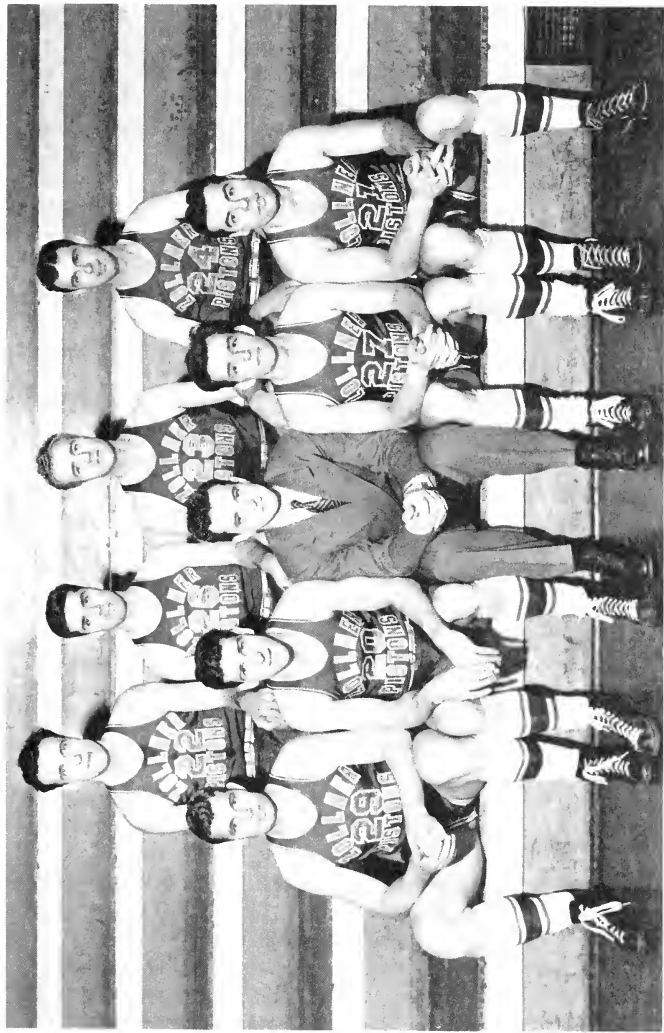
The NBL's "regulars"—Fort Wayne, Oshkosh and Sheboygan—remained, but the Chicago Studebakers retired. There were rumors of racial dissension breaking up the Chicago franchise (these are reported in most NBL and NBA history books) but this was repudiated in Peterson's *Cages to Jump Shots*:

"Coach Johnny Jordan, who later coached for many years at Notre Dame...said there was no racial tension on the team. 'There was no strife at all,' Jordan said, 'and the blacks were treated well by players and fans because, you know, people knew the Globetrotters as great ball players. They were well received.'

"Bernie Price, a five-year veteran of the 'Trotters when he joined the Studebakers, agreed with Jordan: 'We played all year together and didn't have any problems,' Price said. 'The only time we had a break-up was for the World Tournament at the end of the year. I think it was a matter of egos. I don't believe it was racial.'"¹⁰

The Cleveland Chase Brass team filled the Chicago void, and the NBL was back to four teams. High scoring Mel Reibe, a 5-11 pivotman,

¹⁰ p.131.



Zoller Pistons, 1943-44, National Basketball League. Top L to R: John Pelkington, Buddy Jeannette, Jerry Bush, Carlisle Towery. Bottom L to R: Dale Hamilton, Bob McDermott, coach Carl Bennett, Chick Reiser, Paul Birch.

led Cleveland. The Brass had not learned the Chuckovits lesson from Toledo. Riebe would become the league's top scorer, but the Brass lost 12 of its first 13 games. Gainer wound up playing for Sheboygan, backing up Mike Novak, who had been freed with the breakup of Chicago.

Zollner manager Carl Bennett scheduled several exhibition games before the Pistons opened their regular league schedule on the road with a two-game swing through Sheboygan and Oshkosh. The home opener was set for December 13 against the Redskins, playoff winners the previous year over the Zollners.

Midland, playing AAU competition, was no match in three warmups, but the Washington Bears (formerly the Rens) were an entirely different story. The Bears had won the world tournament from Oshkosh in the Spring and were anxious to get even with Fort Wayne for two out of three losses in post-season activity.

The Bears and Pistons developed an intense rivalry, which included some locker room brawling. Their December 7 exhibition at Fort Wayne's North Side gym drew a crowd of 3,000. Washington won 54-48. The Bears followed with another win 53-46 at Defiance, and the third straight happened in Toledo, 51-49. The Bears had Fort Wayne's number and whipped them again in Washington 40-26.

The Pistons gave a big height advantage to Sheboygan since the Redskins had added Novak to their roster, but precision floor play by Fort Wayne helped the Pistons cut Sheboygan down to size, 55-44, atoning for last year's playoff defeat. McDermott led all scorers with 23 points.

He was also one of the most aggressive players. The result, as Bud Jeannette said, was that "Mac is the one who got in trouble all the time." Once during a game with the Rens, McDermott was his usual rough self on the floor. The player he was covering followed the Pistons into their locker room after the game. Hot words were exchanged and the Ren threw a punch.

Bud and Paul Birch intervened to make peace. Bud insisted that only one punch was thrown, but Blackie Towery remembers a few more. At any rate, Buddy had to take Birch to hospital later with a cut lip.

By early January the Pistons had won six of their first seven league games, losing only to Oshkosh (at North Side) 53-44. One third of the way into the season, the Pistons had a comfortable lead.

Military service calls continued to plague the league's personnel, Oshkosh apparently losing more of their stars than the others. The All-Stars had lost Bob Carpenter, Lou Barle, Eddie Riska, Ralph Vaughn and Herm Witasek from their front liners. The Pistons' new service calls were

for Gus Doerner and Jack Keller, but the Jeannette and Reiser additions still gave them a rugged pro front line.

There was a lot of distance between the teams with Sheboygan being the only one to offer any sort of challenge. The Redskins caught the Pistons 42-29 in an off-night at North Side, but it merely stopped a seven-game Fort Wayne winning streak.

The Pistons went to 11-2 then finished the season at 18-4, four full games ahead of the Redskins. Oshkosh won only seven (7-15) and Cleveland just three (3-15). Riebe beat McDermott for the scoring championship, 323-306, but the Pistons' overall balance was unstoppable.

After 1943's disappointing playoff loss to Sheboygan, the Pistons were fired up for this year's action. The championship playoffs were for the best three-of-five and the first round was the usual two-of-three. Fort Wayne polished off Cleveland in two straight, 64-47 and 42-31.

For the championship, Fort Wayne chose to play the first two games at Sheboygan and the final three (if necessary) in Fort Wayne. McDermott and Bush hit two late baskets to win the first game, 55-53, and then in an amazing defensive display, the Z's won the second game 36-26, holding Sheboygan (in their home court) to just six field goals.

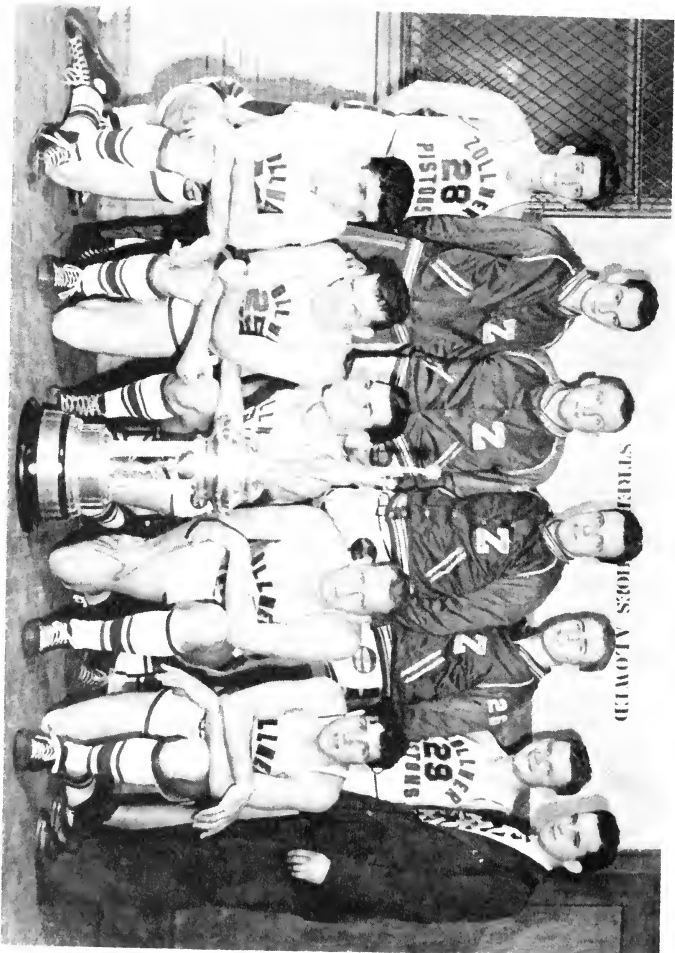
The third (and deciding) game became almost a formality. The Pistons jumped in front 33-11 and coasted home, 48-38. They were champions of the National Basketball League at last, in both the regular season and the playoffs.

The pro tournament in Chicago was growing in popularity and Leo Fischer moved it to Chicago Stadium. Fort Wayne did not have any trouble in its opener, easing by the Dayton Aviators 59-34. The next test was the toughest assignment, but the Zollners survived the New York Rens, 42-38.

The Brooklyn Eagles surprised the Harlem Globetrotters, 63-41 in the other semifinal behind the 32-point sharp shooting of Bob Tough. It looked as if Tough was filling out an employment application with the Pistons with his long-shot capabilities.

The Pistons coasted by the Eagles. Their first world's championship was in their grasp. It was the best basketball campaign they had ever had — and one of the best in the annals of the pro sport.

They had a triumphant return to Fort Wayne, where, in the season finale, the Z's beat the National League All-Stars for the second straight year. At half-time of the All-Star game, NBL President Leo Fischer presented the Naismith Cup to owner Fred Zollner. McDermott was named the pro tournament's most valuable player.



STREET FIGHTERS ALLOWED

World champion Zollner Pistons, 1943-44: standing L to R: Chick Reiser, Jim Glass, Ed Sadowski, John Pelkington, Jerry Bush, Herm Schaefer, Carl Bennet. Kneeling L to R: Buddy Jeannette, Charlie Shipp, Paul Birch, Bob Symor, Bobby McDermott.

In total for the season, the Pistons won 42 of the 52 games played, only four of the losses coming in National League play. They were finally kings of the hill.

The season had happened as if it were well planned. The seven-man nucleus held up. McDermott was the individual leader but the others split up the scoring burdens nearly equally, averaging about six points a game as Mac was close to a 14-point average.

Dale Hamilton, the eighth man, managed to get in 11 of the 22 league games and was a dependable reserve. Jeannette was a spark with his 184 points. Bush and Pelkington had 132 and Towery 129. Chick Reiser chipped in with 81 points and Birch, the oldest player at 33, had 71.

The only major injury came with a sprained ankle to Jeannette in the next to last game of the world's tournament.

Between seasons, some of the players turned to softball to keep in shape. Birch, McDermott, Armstrong and Jeannette all played on a Piston softball team, either the 'big team' (as Bud called it) or the reserves.

1944-45

As the new season approached, there was guarded optimism among the members. The NBL had been firing on about three and a half cylinders with Fort Wayne, Oshkosh and Sheboygan still the stabilizers. Basketball was on the upswing in popularity. Ned Irish had made the National Invitational Tournament a big event, more creditable and commercial than the new NCAA. He had popularized college double-headers, sometimes triple-headers, and the fad grew. The pro tournament was gaining stature and the game which pitted the pro champs against the College All-Stars to open the season was becoming a huge happening.

It became an even bigger event when the Zollner Pistons won the pro tournament and became the team to face the Collegians. Going to the pro tournament and to the College All-Star game became big social venues for Fort Wayne-ites as they could easily drive to the Windy City or hop on the Broadway Limited at Penn Station and be in downtown Chicago in two and a half hours.

It was vaguely reminiscent of the Fort Wayne scene some thirty years before when their famous football team, the Fort Wayne Friars,

would have a trainload of pilgrims on hand when they faced their arch foes of the gridiron, Wabash.

The train was also the principal mode of transportation for the players. They were familiar with the journeys between the chief cities in the league. Occasionally the weather would intervene. Once, the team was stranded for six days in Oshkosh after a blizzard. The only towns where this was a problem were Oshkosh and Sheboygan.

The trophy room was getting filled but there was a spot for the College All-Star medal and that became the target. The game was set for December 1 in Chicago Stadium and coach McDermott assembled his team for early October practices and then arranged a pre-season swing through the East to insure the team's readiness.

Gone to military service were two of the Pistons' "originals," Blackie Towery and Dale Hamilton. They had been in on the first NBL tipoff in 1941-42. Zollner and Bennett had already filled those vacancies with pro veteran Charlie Shipp and independent Bob Synott.

Shipp had started in 1938 with the Akron Goodyears, then moved to Oshkosh for four years through 1944. It was his last-second shot that beat Fort Wayne in the 1943 pro tournament. For the six-three Synott, it was his last chance at pro ball.

Warming up for the College All-Stars found the Z's continuing the roll with which they finished last season. They beat the American League champion Wilmington Bombers twice, 37-33 and 38-31, knocked off the Philadelphia Sphas 33-29 before a huge turnout in Independence Hall. The Baltimore Bullets fell, 47-31 and Wilkes-Barre, 65-47.

The Dayton Bombers provided another tuneup at Fort Wayne's North Side gym, beating the Dayton Aviators, 51-38. After this November 28 date, the Zollners headed for Chicago Stadium and the showdown against the College All-Stars. The collegians had beaten the pro champs in the four previous All-Star games: the Harlem Globetrotters, Oshkosh twice and the Washington Bears. A record crowd of 21,500 (basketball's biggest at the time) saw the Pistons, with their precision ball handling, set plays and give-and-go offense, beat the Stars, 43-38.

Towery, on furlough from the Army for a couple of games, was one of the offensive stars. The All-Stars led just once in the game at 21-20. It was a monumental win for the Zollners and the National League, who had not been able to beat college's best in four previous tries.

Six-foot-eight Jim Glass, a teammate of Hamilton's with the state champion South Side Archers of 1938, had returned from service. He had played with the Pistons when they entered their first pro tournament in

1941. Now, at age 23, he was practically a returning veteran, and he stuck with the team throughout the 1945 campaign.

The NBL was reorganized with six teams. Military service calls were still a problem but there were enough holdovers and returnees to stock the six clubs. Allmen Transfer picked up the Cleveland franchise while Chicago returned under the flag of the American Gears.

Mel Riebe was still the Cleveland hot-shot and the Allmens were improved with the signing of Tom Chukovitz, who had played with the Akron Firestones and Toledo. An independent, the Pittsburgh Raiders, was made up mostly of local talent. Paul Kessy, who had tried out with the Pistons two years before, made the early roster.

The six-team league was divided into two divisions: the East had Fort Wayne, Cleveland and Pittsburgh; the West had Sheboygan, Chicago and Oshkosh. That eliminated the four-team circuit of the previous two years when all clubs were in the playoffs. Two of the six would not make the playoffs in the new setup.

The Pistons opened the league season with a 51-34 drubbing of Cleveland, highlight of which was Bush and Towery holding the 1944 scoring leader, Riebe, to just one basket. Then it was a two-game swing into Wisconsin and an opening 55-49 win at Sheboygan. The next night at Oshkosh, the Pistons lost their first game of the year, a four-pointer, to the All-Stars. Then they went on to Cleveland for another shot at the Allmens.

In contrast to their easy win against Cleveland, this was a real barnburner. Jeannette hit two free throws with 10 seconds left to send the game into overtime. The Pistons won 48-47.

That started the Zollners on another roll. The league itself had gained more stability in competitive strength except for the superiority of the Pistons on the top and the inferiority of the inexperienced Pittsburgh Raiders on the bottom. The fact that they were in the same division may have helped in the balance of the other four clubs.

Celtic veteran Dutch Dehnert had taken over the coaching of Sheboygan and had as his standbys Mike Novak, Ed Dancker, Dick Schulz and Rube Laudenschlager. Jack Tierney was coach of the American Gears and they had great offensive strength from a couple of college stars, Stan Patrick of Illinois, and Dick Triptow of DePaul. Elmer Gainer had gone to Chicago, and Bill McDonald was an offensive backcourt threat.

At Oshkosh, Lon Darling had added football star Clint Wager, and Cowboy Edwards was ready for a comeback after his worst year when he was benched for his rebellious behaviour. Bill Komenich was back in the

fold. Football star Ted Fritsch was a late-roster addition to give the All-Stars added bulk.

The Pittsburgh Raiders were coached by Joe Urso. The team's biggest gun was Huck Hartman from Washington and Jefferson.

After the loss at Oshkosh, the Pistons won 14 straight in the league. They picked up a lot of exhibition wins, too, and 29 games into the season, including their Eastern pre-season tour and the College All-star triumph, their record stood at a fat 28-1.

The league schedule was for 30 games, but the Pistons kept busy with exhibition games, fanning interest in neighboring communities. They were a big draw in any area in the country as the reigning National League and world's tournament champions. Crowds at North Side gym were generally in the 3,000 category but many became sellouts (3,600-3,800) as the Pistons generated more acclaim.

When asked what it was like, Bud Jeannette said, "At that time, North Side was a nice play to play. A nice floor." The only difficult thing was a wall at one end, which players might run into.

As well as high schools, the teams often played in churches. As Blackie Towery said, for exhibition games they played anywhere.

The Pistons practised at New Haven High School, as well as playing an occasional game there. The players did not consider it a hardship practising in one place but playing their home games in another.

Jeannette himself lived near South Side High School and often did his solo practising there. When asked how that was arranged, he said, "Oh, I knew everyone in town."

The Pistons did their share of helping the war effort by playing service teams, and military and Red Cross benefits. On a Southern swing they played the Smyrna Air Base and exhibitions in Chattanooga, Birmingham and Atlanta. One of their exhibition wins at North Side was against the Rochester (NY) Pros, 57-49. The club was run by Les Harrison, who had whetted his appetite in an early pro tournament experience with the Rochester Seagrams-Ebers. Harrison had his sights on getting into the National League and had a strong nucleus of Eastern College stars. When he brought his club to Fort Wayne, the result was his first loss of the season. Rochester later would avenge this with a 54-49 win over the Z's, one of their few losses of the season. It was a foreshadowing of a great professional basketball rivalry, as the Royals joined the NBL the next season.

One of the games during this era of great defenses was a 73-64 win for Fort Wayne at Chicago American Gears. To that time, this was

the highest scoring game in league history, and a portent of what was to come.

In another sizzler, Cleveland's Allmens nosed out the Pistons 62-61 even though McDermott scored 36 points. At that time, this was a league record, eclipsing Cowboy Edwards' 35 two years earlier in a playoff game against the Z's.

Fort Wayne clinched the NBL regular season championship as early as February 18 when the Z's beat Sheboygan, 64-52. Of the five league defeats suffered during the season, two were at the hands of the Chicago American Gears, one to Cleveland and the other to Sheboygan.

The Chicago losses were 52-50 (Bush out with an injury) and 57-55; Cleveland beat them 62-61. Sheboygan gave them their worst beating of the year, 70-53. The Pistons' 25-5 record was 12 games in front of Cleveland while Pittsburgh trailed in the East with 7-23.

For the first time, Oshkosh failed to make the playoffs. Sheboygan led the division with 19-11. Chicago's 14-16 was two games better than the All-Stars. Mel Riebe nosed out McDermott as the NBL's scoring leader, 607-603.

Jeannette had 252 points; Pelkington 246; Reiser 217; and Bush 154. Shipp and Synott played in all the games; Birch missed two and the youngster, Jim Glass of Fort Wayne, scored seven points in 14 appearances. Big Ed Sadowski came out of military furlough from Wright Field in Dayton, and played the last games of the season and in the playoffs. He had been a teammate of Jeannette and Bush with the Detroit Eagles. His bulky 6-5 frame carried 245 pounds and he was a good scorer.

Fort Wayne knocked out Cleveland in two straight to open the playoffs, 78-50 at home and 68-51 away. Then came Sheboygan. After an opening 50-47 loss to the Redskins, the Zollners came home to North Side and won three straight, 58-47, 58-41 and 59-49.

Fort Wayne's supremacy in pro basketball was never more evident than in the world's pro tournament when the team cruised to its second title without breaking a sweat. They beat Oshkosh 62-50 in the opener, walloped the New York Rens, 68-45, and demolished the Dayton Acmes, 78-52 for the championship.

Jeannette was named the tournament's most valuable player. He and McDermott were on the all-tourney first team while Bush, Pelkington and Reiser were selected for the second team. Herm Schaefer had returned from service to play in the world's tournament. The Pistons climaxed the season by coming home and beating the National League All-Stars, 59-47.

The calendar year 1945 had to be Fred Zollner's proudest. His heavy duty aluminum pistons were helping the United States win World War II, and he had the best basketball and softball teams in the world.

To put icing on the National Basketball League regular season and playoff championships, the Zollner softballers had won their first world's Amateur Softball Association title. And, the basketball horizons were getting brighter. The Pistons would be hosting the College All-Stars in the 1945 lidlifter at Chicago Stadium November 30.

Coach Bobby McDermott was assembling his new squad. Manager Carl Bennett was looking at an expanded National League, perhaps more solid than any time in its history.

Coming off their greatest season, McDermott and Bennett had to keep looking ahead. Veteran Paul Birch's contract was sold to the Youngstown Bears, recently transferred from Pittsburgh. At 36 years old, Birch would coach the team.

Fort Wayne product Jim Glass was released and six-six Bob Kinney was signed. Kinney had been impressive against the Pistons in the All-Star game. The Indianapolis Kautskys returned to the NBL after a three-year hiatus and the Rochester Royals became the eighth league member. The Royals had been, perhaps, the best independent club in the country and had split two games with the Pistons the previous year.

Big Ed Sadowski was out of the service. He signed with the Z's. The top-seven nucleus for either of the two years may have been the best set of pros ever put together. The 1945 record bore this out.

The only major change was Sadowski for Birch, plus Jeannette, Bush, Sadowski, Reiser, McDermott, Pelkington and Shipp. The bench was sturdier with Synott and Kinney. Both Armstrong and Schaefer were expected back from the service, and the Pistons had opted for Bob Tough, a former Brooklyn Eagle who had scored 32 in one of the pro tournament games. Tough was still in the service for most of the season.

The season was for 34 games in the league; Fort Wayne, Rochester, Youngstown and Cleveland played in the east while the Western Division had Oshkosh, Sheboygan, the Chicago American Gears and the Kautskys.

The Pistons played six exhibition games before the College All-Star game. In an Eastern swing, they beat Hartford, Connecticut, 64-33; Trenton, New Jersey, 59-53; Troy, New York, 56-32; walloped the vaunted Philadelphia Sphas, 85-47, and clipped Baltimore easily, 77-47.

They played one exhibition game at home, in the New Haven High School gym and nosed out the Chicago Monarchs, 54-50.

Then it was on to Chicago for the College All-Star game, which attracted 23,912 people to Chicago Stadium.

En route to Chicago McDermott was passing between cars on the train when the wind blew the door shut against his hand. It went through the glass and he suffered a severely cut arm. As Carl Bennett observed, he was the kind of player that simply went to the doctor, bandaged it up and played anyway. It did not stop him. He led the teams in scoring with 13 points as the Pistons took their second in a row from the country's best collegiate talent, 63-55. The Pistons retained the honor of being the only pro team to beat the All-Stars, and they were the toast of the country, ready to defend their National League championship.

A shadow of what might be ahead loomed when the Pistons opened the defense of their National League championship at home against the newcomers from Rochester. The Royals beat them 56-54, one of the few home losses in Zollner history. One of basketball's most intense rivalries had begun.

Shaking off the Rochester loss, the Pistons went on to win 14 of their first 16 games, but the Royals kept pace by winning 11 of their first 12. Fortunately for the Zollners, Fort Wayne inflicted that one loss at Rochester, 63-59.

The Z's were playing a heavy schedule with at least as many exhibitions as league games. While their league record stood at 14-2, they had won 33 of 36 games played. One of the losses was to AAU-status Midland Dow Chemicals.

Zollner and Bennett were hopeful that the sports bug would hit Midland, adding another strong industrial sponsor to basketball. Midland was Fort Wayne's arch foe in the softball realm. The NBL was improving rapidly but there were still some weak members along the way.

Rochester remained unshakable in the National League and clung to the lead into the first eight weeks of the season with the Pistons pressuring them in second place. When the Royals suffered three straight losses on a disastrous Midwest road swing to Sheboygan, Oshkosh and Chicago, the Pistons moved back into first place and reasserted their NBL dominance. As the teams headed into the home stretch, Fort Wayne was 22-4; the Royals 16-6.

Even though the NBL had hired Ward (Piggy) Lambert, veteran Purdue coach, to be its commissioner at the start of the season, there was still considerable instability in scheduling with many of the league teams

playing each other in exhibition games. For example, prime rivals Fort Wayne and Rochester played an exhibition (which the Pistons won 60-53) in Toronto's Maple Leaf Gardens. It was the first pro basketball match played in Canada and drew a crowd of 12,000.

Another exhibition swing chalked up wins in Chattanooga, Nashville and two in Atlanta. On the way home, the Z's returned to NBL play, beat Cleveland but lost to Birch's Youngstown club, 60-57.

In the final eight league games, the Pistons won just four, which should have sent up storm warnings for the playoffs. They suffered back-to-back losses to Rochester; Youngstown beat them again; and the Chicago Gears won their first game in Fort Wayne, 54-46.

The Pistons had secured their fourth straight regular season championship March 2 and coasted to a two-game margin over Rochester (26-8 to 24-10). It gave them the home court advantage in the three-of-five playoffs. Fort Wayne won the first game at North Side, 54-44, but then lost on their home court, 58-52. Rochester won the next two in Edgerton Park Sports Arena to knock the Pistons out of the Naismith Cup running.

The Royals went on to the playoff championship by beating Sheboygan, 60-50, 61-54 and 66-48. In the Pistons-Royals series, Al Cervi, of Rochester, held McDermott to 24 points, a six-point average.

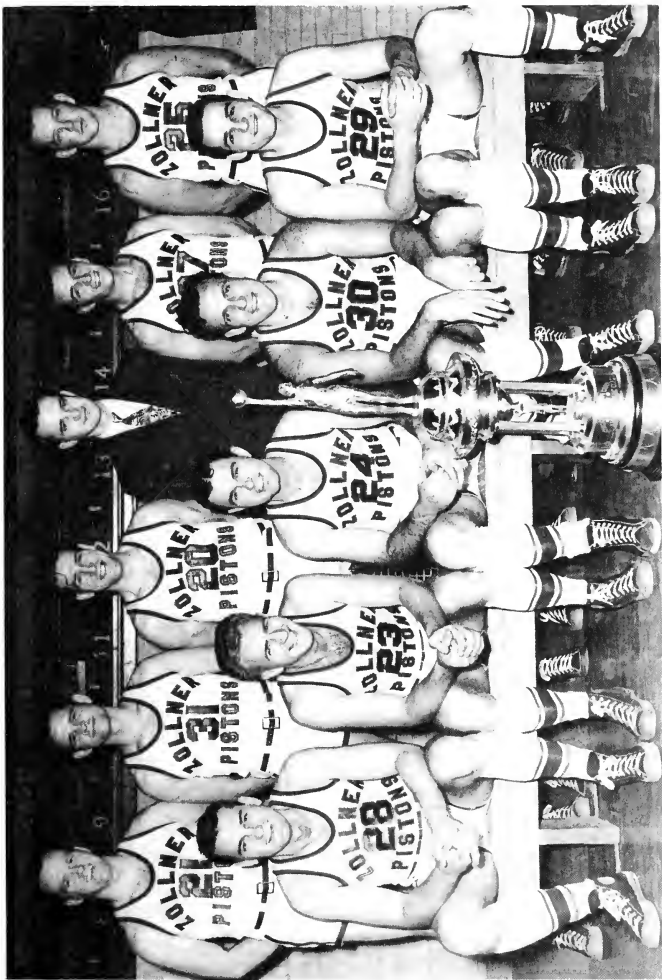
Then it was back to the world's tournament. The Pistons were going after their third straight, but the big news was Chicago's signing of giant George Mikan, the DePaul All-American, who had led the Blue Demons to the NIT championship.

Mikan's 20 points-a-game-average in college earned him a five-year contract worth \$60,000 from the Gears' hoop-happy but eccentric owner, Maurice White. Mikan's professional debut would be in the world's tournament.

The Pistons' final warmup before going to Chicago was an exhibition against Oshkosh, proceeds of which were going to the Fort Wayne Junior Chamber of Commerce to build a civic auditorium. The "auditorium" evolved into the Allen County War Memorial Coliseum.

The world's tournament changed its format slightly, working to Fort Wayne's advantage. The tournament spotlight was as much on Mikan as on the Pistons for an unprecedented third-straight championship.

Fort Wayne nosed out the Midland Dow Chemicals 65-62 in the opener then squeaked by Baltimore 50-49 to set up the playoff against Oshkosh. Mikan's Gears had polished off Pittsburgh 69-58 then nosed Sheboygan 52-51. That gave them a semifinal spot against Oshkosh. "Old



Zoller Pistons, 1945-46. Standing L to R: Bob Tough, Curly Armstrong, Bob McDermott, coach Carl Bennett, Chick Reiser, Charlie Shipp. Seated L to R: Bob Kinney, Jerry Bush, Carlisle Towery, John Pelkington, Milo Komenich. In the foreground stands the World Championship trophy.

pro" Cowboy Edwards gave the newly-rich Mikan a lesson in pivot play. The All-Stars prevailed, 72-66.

The Pistons dropped the first game to the confident Oshkosh club 59-57 but then came back to win the next two, 56-47 and 73-37, to become the three-time champions of the world's tournament. It was a momentous win for Fort Wayne basketball, particularly after the Z's had lost the NBL playoffs to Rochester.

Mikan had made his pro impression. In the five tournament games, he led the scorers with 100 points, a 20-point average, and was named the most valuable player. He would be the Gears' anchor in the upcoming season.

The Zollners played a total of 80 games during the season, winning 64 of them. In their five-year history, they had had 243 wins, just 64 losses and an NBL record that stood at 120-40 plus four consecutive league championships.

Curly Armstrong returned from service in time for the pro tournament; Schaefer was back, and Bob Tough arrived from the Brooklyn Eagles for the last five games. Closing out the season, Carl Bennett signed six-foot-eight Milo Komenich, an All-American from Wyoming.

McDermott as usual led the Pistons in scoring with 458 points, a 13.5 average, but Bob Carpenter of Oshkosh nosed out McDermott for the league championship with 473 points. George Glamack, of the up and coming Rochester Royals, was the only other 400, with 417. Big Ed Sadowski and Buddy Jeannette were next in line for the Pistons in scoring for the National League year. At the end of the season, the league media and other coaches voted McDermott as the "greatest pro player in history."

1946-47

The 1946-47 season may go down as a pivotal year in pro basketball history. It certainly was for the Fort Wayne Zollner Pistons.

World War II had ended, a sports-starved nation awaited and the horizons of pro ball never seemed brighter. Returning servicemen and more collegians, matured by college-service competition, were getting into the pro basketball swing.

The National Basketball League barely survived the war. Fred Zollner had helped underwrite its existence in 1943-44 when the league

was down to a 22-game schedule and four teams: Fort Wayne, Oshkosh, Sheboygan and Cleveland.

The NBL was starting the 1946-47 campaign with 12 solid members, up from eight the previous year. The Cleveland Allmen Transfers, with a discouraging 4-29 record, had dropped out, but newcomers included the Syracuse Nationals, Buffalo Bisons, Anderson (Indiana) Duffey Packers, Toledo Jeeps and the Detroit Gems. Holdovers were Fort Wayne, Rochester Royals, Oshkosh All-Stars, Sheboygan Redskins, Indianapolis Kautskys, Chicago American Gears and Youngstown Bears.

The league, still under the guidance of Commissioner Ward Lambert, opted for a 44-game schedule, up 10 games from the previous year. Rochester, Fort Wayne, Toledo, Syracuse, Buffalo and Youngstown were in the Eastern Division; Oshkosh, Sheboygan, Indianapolis, Chicago, Anderson and Detroit in the West. Buffalo transferred to the Tri-Cities thirteen games into the season.

Even though the NBL was recognized as the premiere domain of professional basketball, it was still quite provincial. Syracuse, New York, was the furthest East that the league had ventured. The Pistons and Rochester had barnstormed through the East and as far south as Atlanta. The league had still maintained enough stability to attract the best basketball talent.

On June 6, 1946, about a dozen members of the Arena Managers Association met in New York and decided to jump into the pro basketball pond. They were owners, operators or tenants of the country's largest spectator arenas but were novices in basketball. Anticipating a postwar sports boom, they wanted to fill their arenas on "dark" nights. They had been highly successful in pro hockey and college basketball double-headers.

Madison Square Garden's famous Ned Irish had gotten his entrepreneurial start with college twin bills. Chicago Stadium, Buffalo, Philadelphia and Boston had been very successful with the collegians and Chicago had done well with the College All-Star attraction and the world's pro tournament.

Five of the six National Hockey League franchise holders answered the basketball bell: Boston, Chicago, Toronto, New York and Detroit entered teams. Montreal demurred. Six others came in, many with franchises in the American Hockey League: Philadelphia, Providence, Washington, Cleveland, Pittsburgh and St. Louis. They formed the Basketball Association of America and chose Maurice Podoloff, president of



1946 world champion Zollner Pistons. Standing L to R: coach Carl Bennett, John Pelkington, Ed Sadowski, sponsor Fred Zollner. Middle row L to R: Jerry Bush, Chick Reiser, Bob Tough, Charlie Shipp. Bottom L to R: Buddy Jeannette, Bob McDermott, Curly Armstrong.

the American Hockey League, as their leader. Blackie Towery described Podoloff's presence in the league: "It's too bad Podoloff isn't commissioner today. When you went in to see him, it was strictly business. He ran it like Landis ran baseball, with an iron fist."

The BAA drew up an ambitious 60-game schedule, shuffled the rules a little (moving to a 48-minute game with four 12-minute quarters), and moved the personal foul penalty to six from five before game ejection. Strangely enough, there was not a huge scramble for players, perhaps because of the National League's tight geographic barriers and the curiosity of pro basketball's move into the huge arenas. The sport had some growing pains ahead.

The new season would challenge the Pistons in many ways. Upstart Rochester had knocked them off their NBL perch in the playoffs, but there was redemption in winning their third world's pro tournament title. Rochester did not participate.

Coaching challenges lured Ed Sadowski and Buddy Jeannette away from the Zollners. Sadowski went as player-coach to the Toronto Huskies in the new league (BAA), and Jeannette returned to his East coast environs to play for and coach the Baltimore Bullets in the American Basketball League.

In early October, amidst the flurry of new basketball activity, coach Bob McDermott assembled his squad: Chick Reiser, Charlie Shipp, Jerry Bush, John Pelkington, Bob Tough, Curly Armstrong, Bob Kinney, Milo Komenich, Carlisle (Blackie) Towery, and himself.

As the new season dawned, much of the focus was on Chicago's "\$12,000 baby," giant George Mikan. He had played in the pro tournament with the American Gears and despite Chicago's third place finish, had scored 100 points and was the most valuable player in his pro debut.

The Pistons had never faced Mikan but he became part of their agenda because he would be playing for the College All-Stars against the Z's on November 29 in Chicago Stadium. Fort Wayne, the only pro team to beat the All-Stars, needed a win to retire the trophy with three straight wins.

As well as the All-Star game, the Pistons wanted to regain their National League supremacy after losing in the playoffs the previous year to Rochester.

Carl Bennett booked a heavy schedule of pre-season games to tune up the Pistons for their big Chicago date with the College All-Stars. He later explained that the exhibition games were a form of training and

getting in shape for the regular season. Exhibition games for charity, which are common now, were more unusual then.

Midland surprised them in the first exhibition (on an Illinois-St. Louis swing) by beating the Pistons 48-39, but after that, the Z's barnstormed their way through nine straight non-league foes.

League play started early because of the expanded schedule of 44 NBL games, and Fort Wayne opened November 17 by beating Youngstown, 61-53. Paul Birch was no longer coach at Youngstown, having moved on to the new BAA as coach of the Pittsburgh Ironmen. The Pistons made it three in a row in league play, beating Detroit, 60-44, and Indianapolis, 57-55, in Fort Wayne.

Then they went to Anderson and were upset by the Packers, 55-52. Anderson was coached by Fort Wayne's Central High legend, Murray Mendenhall. He had guided two of Fort Wayne's prize players, Curly Armstrong and Herm Schaefer, who became pros after helping Indiana to its first NCAA championship in 1940.

So the Pistons were 12-2 overall and 3-1 in the NBL when they went to Chicago in quest of their third straight win over the All-Stars. The game drew the biggest basketball crowd up to that time and the 24,000 fans were treated to one of the best-ever in the Pro-Collegian series.

The 6 foot 10 Mikan and college's best prevailed in a 57-54 thriller. There was some consolation when the Pistons' McDermott set a tournament scoring record of 21 points in the defeat.

It was back to business in the NBL and serenity prevailed in Fort Wayne as the Zollners methodically won the next two league games, beating Detroit 62-39 in Fort Wayne and the Jeeps in Toledo, 64-60. In early December they were 5-1 in the league and 15-2 overall.

The rest of pro ball was experiencing some lumps. Mikan was involved in a contract dispute with the American Gears' owner, Maurice White, and pouted for the first month of the season. The highly publicized five-year \$60,000 deal for Mikan turned out to be \$7,000 a season plus \$50 a time for personal appearances for the American Gear Company. \$7,000 was the NBL maximum at the time. An unusual kicker was a bonus to Mikan for \$5 a basket and \$2 for a free throw in games which the Gears won.

In Robert W. Peterson's *Cages to Jump Shots*, Gears' star Bob Calihan remembered: "We had a crazy owner. After Mikan quit the team with his contract dispute, the owner came up with a plan to pay us \$6 a basket, \$3 for a free throw and \$3 for an assist, but only if we won. If we

didn't win, we didn't get that bonus. We got our salaries, but this was a bonus for winning."¹¹ So much for team play!

The Fort Wayne team played at its business-as-usual gait, won a pair of exhibitions in Bremen, Indiana, and Champaign, Illinois, before going to 6-1 in the NBL. Then, inexplicably, the wheels started to fall off.

In the worst stretch in Zollner history, the Pistons went on the road and lost four in a row: to Indianapolis, 65-39; Chicago 47-40; Sheboygan 65-56, and Oshkosh, 71-50. Then, Fort Wayne got back on track by beating Oshkosh 72-60 in North Side Gym.

The Pistons took a 7-5 league record east and came away battered and bruised by Rochester, 55-51, and by Syracuse, 61-47. Fort Wayne was 7-7 in the league, which was, for them, unprecedented. They had dropped six of their last seven NBL battles. They had lost in overtime to the College All-Stars. There was a simmering unrest in the ranks of the defending world pro tournament champs.

It boiled over with a player brawl in the men's lounge on the New York Central's overnight sleeper during the trip to Fort Wayne from Syracuse.

The players sometimes unwound over a beer in the lounge. There were lingering bad feelings over the Z's current status. McDermott and Charlie Shipp had a disagreement with Milo Komenich over the rookie's play in Syracuse. McDermott let fly at Komenich. Both ended with cuts on their faces.

Carl Bennett had retired for the night but Curly Armstrong called on him to break up the fracas. He sent Shipp and Komenich to bed, and heard McDermott's version of events. Later he listened to the other two.

Back in Fort Wayne, he discussed the matter with Fred Zollner. It was obvious that something had to be done to resolve the resulting high emotions within the team. Fred Zollner had overlooked problems with McDermott in the past, but now it seemed time for him to move on. All three players were suspended.

McDermott and Shipp left for other clubs, while Komenich was later reinstated by the Pistons.

The Zollner company magazine, *The Rocket*, called it "one of the most sensational shake ups in the history of professional basketball." It continued: "Carl Bennett...emphasized that not because of any game

¹¹ p.160.



A photo from The Rocket, December 1946. The original caption reads: "Milo Komenich and Curly Armstrong tangle with College All-Star cagers during the annual game in the Chicago Stadium. Despite a hard-fought battle that went into overtime, the Pistons lost, 57-54."



Zollner Pistons, 1946-47. Standing L to R: Frank Gates, Curly Armstrong, Bob Tough, Chick Reiser, Hans Dielnelt, Jerry Steiner. Seated L to R: Bob Kinney, Carlisle Towery, coach Carl Bennett, Richie Niemiera, Milo Komenich, John Pelkington.

losses but as a result of insubordination, three Piston players were suspended. McDermott, termed by many as the greatest individual basketball player of all time, has since signed with the American Gears of Chicago, following his outright release from the Pistons."

McDermott immediately became the playing coach with the Gears. Bennett assumed the coaching responsibilities with the Pistons. At the same time as McDermott's move to Chicago, Mikan ended his feuding with owner White and put his Gears uniform back on.

In five short years, McDermott had become the Pistons' living legend. He was, and still is, Fort Wayne's "Mr. Basketball". In *Cages to Jump Shots*, Robert Peterson summarized Mac very well:

"The king of the set shooters was Bobby McDermott, the greatest long distance shooter in history, according to many old professionals.

"McDermott, a speedy 5-foot 11-inch guard who came off the New York City sandlots in the early 1930s, led all American League scorers twice and the NBL's once. Like all two-handed set shooters, he needed a second to set up by bringing his feet together. Then he would lean slightly backward and fire a high arching shot. Statistics were not kept on shooting percentages in those days so we must rely on the memories of old players. They were unanimous in marvelling at McDermott's accuracy.

"Al Cervi, one of the era's best guards, believes that with today's three point shot, McDermott would be among the scoring leaders of the National Basketball Association. 'We're talking about 30 points a game,' he said. Cervi continued:

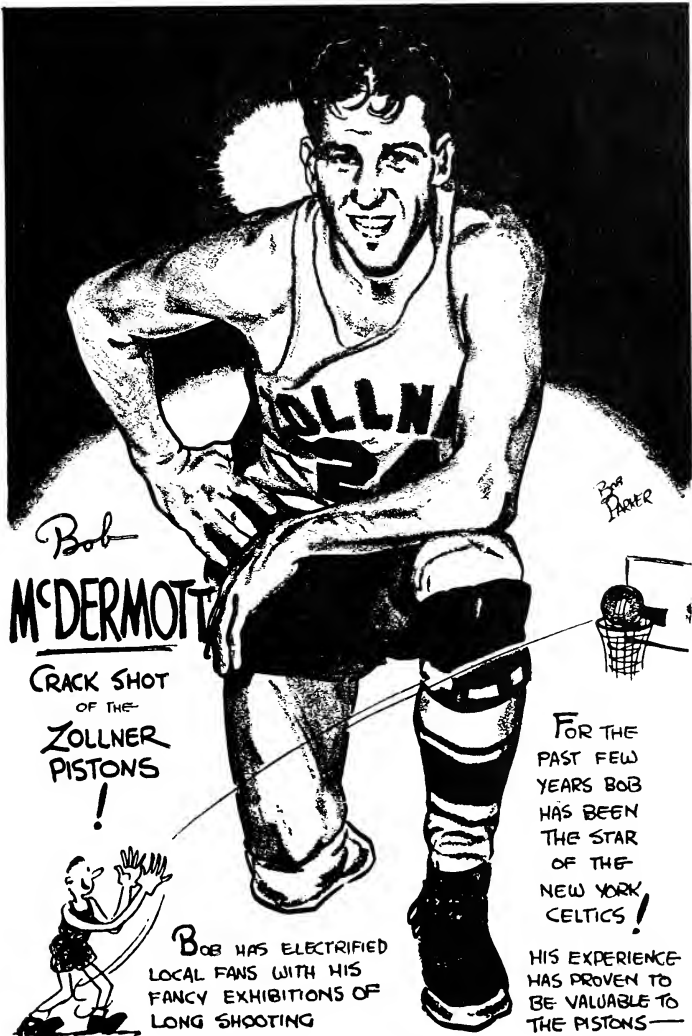
"I played against him three years and I made my credits playing him. He was my best rooter. He could run like hell but he couldn't jump. I could outjump him.

"The first time I saw him. I had just got out of service and joined Rochester.... We were in Fort Wayne and in the dressing room Les Harrison told me, "You've got McDermott." The other players looked at me and said, "Better you than me."

"Before the game started he was putting on an exhibition. He made 10 for 10 out here, 15 for 15 here. The crowd is clapping. I'm clapping too and asking myself "Doesn't the sonuvabitch ever miss?"

"You couldn't let him get the ball. I remember a game in the Chicago Amphitheater, which had the longest court in the United States — 112 feet. He scored three baskets from the midcourt line — that's 56 feet — on me that night and two flicked my fingers. Oh, he could shoot! If he

Fort Wayne Gallery Of Sport



Bob
McDERMOTT

CRACK SHOT
OF THE
**ZOLLNER
PISTONS**
!



BOB HAS ELECTRIFIED
LOCAL FANS WITH HIS
FANCY EXHIBITIONS OF
LONG SHOOTING

FOR THE
PAST FEW
YEARS BOB
HAS BEEN
THE STAR
OF THE
NEW YORK
CELTICS!
!

HIS EXPERIENCE
HAS PROVEN TO
BE VALUABLE TO
THE PISTONS

shot 10 times from 30 feet, I'd guarantee he'd make eight in game conditions."¹²

The McDermott-sparked Pistons were the best teams in National Basketball League history. They won three championships, three world's pro tournaments and beat the College All-Stars twice. After McDermott's firing, the Zollners never won another championship.

After the train incident, Piston pride prevailed and the team beat Sheboygan 69-57 at North Side gym. They lost a 67-65 overtime barnburner to Rochester at home. Buffalo had moved to Tri-Cities (Moline) and Fort Wayne won there, 52-47, and then lost a road game at Toledo, 68-67, leaving them still at .500 with 9-9 on the books. It was time to regroup.

Sheboygan veteran Ken Buehler signed on. Former Notre Dame star Richie Niemiera, who was coaching the Irish freshmen, came aboard. Local favorite Hans Dienelt moved up from the Zollner Reserve club. Butler's Jerry Steiner, Indianapolis Shortridge High coach, came in to play part time. Charlie Shipp had gone to Anderson and the Packers' Frank Gates, out of Sam Houston State University, came to Fort Wayne. Ben Gardner came up from Anderson for one game then dropped out of basketball. Complications arose in filling out the roster when veteran Jerry Bush asked for his release and finished out the season at Anderson. It was his last before being named head coach at Toledo University.

It was a far cry from three years before when just eight players made up the roster for the entire season. In all, 17 different players suited up in games for 1946-47.

With the remaining nucleus of Curly Armstrong, Towery, Komenich, Kinney, Reiser, Pelkington and Tough, the Pistons fared reasonably well the rest of the season. Down the stretch they won 16 and lost 10 for an all-league record of 25-19. This was a solid second in the Eastern Division, six games back of the Rochester Royals.

Toledo and Syracuse deadlocked at 21-23, 10 games back tied for third and the Pistons were paired against Toledo in the playoffs, Rochester against Syracuse.

The Western Division was a tighter fit. The Chicago American Gears, after a 9-12 start, had pulled themselves together under Bobby McDermott and George Mikan to win 17 of their last 23 games, the playoffs and the championship.

¹² p.140-141.

The McDermott-Mikan combination got the Gears back on track but not fast enough to win the Division. Steady Oshkosh (Bob Carpenter, Gene Englund, Cowboy Edwards, Eddie Riska) stood at 28-16, and beat out Indianapolis by a game. Sheboygan tied Chicago at 26-18 for third. Those four went to the playoffs.

Mendenhall, in his first pro coaching outing at Anderson, missed the playoffs by two games while hapless Detroit helped the other teams to good records with their 4-40 showing.

• Mikan played 25 games after his contract dispute, averaging 16.5 points to lead the scorers, and McDermott kept up his 11.5 point average. None of the Pistons managed double figures; Reiser (410), Armstrong (388) and Pelkington (383) topped the scorers.

Rochester knocked out Syracuse three games to one, while it took Fort Wayne five games to beat Toledo, the finale being a decisive 64-46 victory in Fort Wayne. The division championship went to Rochester, two games to one, the clincher a 76-47 whipping at Rochester's Edgerton Park Sports Arena.

It took the Mikan-powered Gears five games to beat Indianapolis in the Western opener, then they took Oshkosh in two straight, 60-54 and 61-60, to qualify for the playoff championship series against Rochester.

The Gears won the playoff title, beating the Royals three of four, with Mikan leading all scorers with nearly a 20-point average.

The Indianapolis Kautskys won the pro tournament, dethroning the Pistons in the process, Fort Wayne being knocked out in the semifinals by Toledo. The Kautsky roster was formidable with Leo Klier, Gus Doerner, Bill Closs, Bob Dietz, Arnie Risen, Herm Schaefer and Ernie Andres.

The Pistons, their all-veteran lineup now sadly depleted, were looking for fresh new stars from the college ranks. Before the pro tournament the Zollners added two of the famous University of Illinois "Whiz Kids", Jack Smiley and Ken Menke, and one of Indiana University's all-time best scorers, home-towner Ralph Hamilton. Later, they would add Walt Kirk, Jr., considered the sixth man of the Whiz Kids. Two of the other Whiz Kids, Andy Phillip and Gene Vance, signed with the Chicago Stags.

The pro sport was still struggling for stability and survival. The National League lost Youngstown. Two businessmen, Max Winter and Ben Berger, bought the struggling Detroit Gem franchise for Minneapolis. The NBL, in a show of strength, drew up an ambitious 60-game schedule. The BAA lost four of its starting 11 franchises, Detroit, Toronto, Pittsburgh and Cleveland, but picked up the American League champs, Buddy Jeannette's Baltimore Bullets. That left them with an eight-team league, reducing their schedule to 48 from 60 games.

Suddenly there was a dream that turned into a nightmare. The unpredictable Chicago Gears' owner Maurice White, flushed with his National League championship, decided to start a league of his own. It was one of pro basketball's more bizarre events. White called it the Professional Basketball League of America. It began with the following franchises: Chicago Gears, St. Paul Saints, Grand Rapids (Michigan) Rangers, Louisville Colonels, Omaha Tomahawks, Kansas City Blues, Waterloo (Iowa) Hawks, St. Joseph (Missouri) Outlaws, Houston Mavericks, Atlanta Crackers, Birmingham Skyhawks, Tulsa Ranchers, Chattanooga Majors, Oklahoma City Drillers, New Orleans Hurricanes and the Springfield (Missouri) Squires.

It was a disaster. The Gears won their first eight games. White's \$600,000 trial balloon burst early and the league was disbanded. A few players were dispersed throughout the NBL. Minneapolis had already signed Jim Pollard, Stanford and Herm Schaefer, an ex-Piston. Then they were dealt a winning hand by being assigned Mikan.

George Ratkovicz went to Rochester, Dick Triptow to Tri-Cities, Price Brookfield to Anderson and McDermott to Sheboygan while newcomer Flint, sponsored by Dow AC, picked up Calihan and Stan Patrick.

The Pistons had signed their Big Ten stars in the spring: Walt Kirk, who had been Illinois' most valuable player in 1945; Jack Smiley, Indiana's leading scorer and MVP in 1947; Ralph Hamilton and Ken Menke, another of the Illinois "Whiz Kids." The Z's had a chance to sign Andy Phillip, which he wanted, but a knee injury during his senior year made them reluctant, and he went to the Chicago Stags with teammate Gene Vance.

Fort Wayne went into the new season with four rookies to go with these veterans: Blackie Towery, John Pelkington, Curly Armstrong, Bob

Tough, Milo Komenich, Richie Niemiera and Bob Kinney. Armstrong was playing captain and Carl Bennett, coach.

The 60-game schedule was the most ambitious in NBL history, it was natural the teams would want to play fewer exhibitions. With Chicago fragmented, Minneapolis replacing Detroit and the Flint Dow ACs picking up the Youngstown vacancy, the NBL had 11 teams set for the season.

The Eastern Division had Rochester, Anderson, Fort Wayne, Syracuse, Toledo and Flint while the West included Minneapolis, Tri-Cities, Oshkosh, Indianapolis and Sheboygan. The top four finishers in each division would qualify for the playoffs.

The BAA's Eastern Division had Philadelphia, New York, Boston and Providence, but was so overloaded with the "Eastern Establishment" that Baltimore and Washington had to fill out the Western Division with the Chicago Stags and St. Louis Bombers. They had started to pick up more college stars but in player personnel, the National League still remained dominant.

The accent was swinging to big men with the arrival of Mikan, Don Otten and Arnie Risen. The six-foot-eleven Otten came from Bowling Green and played for Tri-Cities. Risen was six foot nine and from Ohio State; he went to Indianapolis. The Pistons were shy in this area. Komenich was 6-7, Pelkington and Kinney 6-6, but they were the tallest players on the team.

However, the Pistons presented a well-balanced attack and spread the scoring well. Early on, it became obvious that Komenich was no longer a good fit and he was bartered to Anderson. The Pistons bought Triptow from Tri-Cities.

The deals were good for both clubs. Rochester was the obvious team to beat in the East; Minneapolis, in the West. The Royals were cemented by Bob Davies, Al Cervi, Red Holzman, Fuzzy Levane, Arnie Johnson, Bobby Wanzer and Bill Calhoun. Midway in the season, manager Les Harrison picked up valuable insurance by buying Risen from financially-strapped Indianapolis.

Fort Wayne native Murray Mendenhall had assembled a run-and-shoot offense at Anderson of John (Shotgun) Hargis, Charlie Black (a Kansas All-American), Frankie Brian from LSU, Brookfield and veterans Charlie Shipp and Ed Stanzcak. The last had played had at Central Catholic High School in Fort Wayne.

McDermott had been dealt to Sheboygan, where he immediately became coach, but after nine games, he was traded to Tri-Cities as Doxie

Moore came in to coach. When Tri-Cities gave Mac the coaching job, it distinguished him as having coached four teams in the NBL within a year and half: Fort Wayne, Chicago, Sheboygan and Tri-Cities. He still averaged more than 12 points a game in his 37 games with the Blackhawks.

The Pistons had a respectable year. There was a cautious, feeling-out process early on as the rookies Hamilton, Kirk, Smiley and Menke worked their way into the meld. The basic starting lineup usually had Hamilton and Towery at the forwards, Pelkington at center with Armstrong and Tough at the guards. It was also a good bench with Kinney, Niemiera, Triptow, Smiley and Kirk.

Heated rivalries developed between the Zollners and the Lakers and Royals. Anderson also became involved because of the Fort Wayne-Mendenhall connection. The Pistons began to jell after the Christmas holidays with a 15-3 run and they were contenders down to the wire.

A home winning streak buoyed them into a 40-20 season record, which seemed enough to win a title, but Rochester stayed ahead at 44-16. Anderson was 42-18. Minneapolis won the West with its 43-17 record.

Fort Wayne's loyal fans made the North Side gym a formidable ally to the Pistons. A decade later, George Yardley was a Fort Wayne (and later, Syracuse) star. He never played at North Side, but he heard about it.

"People always talk about the home court being an advantage. You know the way the ball bounces, about the basket, of the lighting. I think it's baloney. Fan support is what makes the difference. Especially when you are younger, enthusiasm is contagious. At North Side, the fans were so close to the floor, [the Pistons] had a huge advantage. Players from other teams told me, they hated coming here."

Later, Minneapolis' Slater Martin was quoted on the courtside seating at North Side: "I never really saw the fans get physical with the players. I had them pull the hair on my legs, though. But there's always a cure for things like that. They had a smart guy in Fort Wayne like that. We'd take the ball out, see, and since there wasn't much room between you and the fans, they could reach out and pull the hair on your legs. But the next time down the court, you'd just have a guy stand in front of him and then he'd move away real quickly and you'd hit the guy with the ball right in the face and that was over with."¹³

¹³ Charles Salzberg, *From Set Shot to Slam Dunk*, p.68.

One night the Lakers walloped the Pistons, 91-64, with Mikan setting a league record of 42 points. Pelkington was out with a broken nose, suffered by an elbow from Oshkosh's Cowboy Edwards. Hamilton missed the game because of the flu. But the following night, Fort Wayne returned to friendly North Side and shellacked Oshkosh, 62-46.

The 21-game home winning streak was broken at the most inappropriate time: the first game of the playoffs against Rochester, 65-56.

The Pistons won the next game in Fort Wayne, 68-64 with Towery and Kinney getting 14 apiece, but Rochester won the next two, 64-47 and 70-62, with Arnie Risen scoring 25 in the finale. This moved the Royals into the division finals.

Anderson knocked out Syracuse in three straight but lost to Rochester in the next round. The Lakers won the title by eliminating Tri-Cities and Oshkosh then winning three of four from the Royals. Mikan averaged 24.4 points in the playoffs; Pollard 12.3, and ex-Piston Schaefer 13.3.

The world's pro tournament was down to eight teams. 1948 would prove to be its final year. Fort Wayne was surprised in the opening round by Tri-Cities, 57-50. The Pistons had won four of six from the Hawks in the regular season. Minneapolis went on to win the championship, beating the New York Rens in the title game, 75-71, as Mikan poured in 40 points. Sweetwater Clifton had 24 in the Rens' loss.

During the regular season, Pelkington led the Pistons in scoring with 495; Armstrong had 435; Towery, 407, and Kinney 390. Mikan's 1195 points was the most-scored in pro ball, while seven-foot Don Otten (with Tri-Cities) was the only other National Leaguer over 900 points (824).

Fred Zollner's Pistons had missed another championship quest. Mikan and Minneapolis were the new leaders.

1948-1949

Since their entry into pro ball in 1941, the Fort Wayne Zollner Pistons took great pride in their "major league" status. They always wanted to compete in the highest echelon of the sport. Perfectionist Fred Zollner would not have it any other way.

When the pro championship was decided by the world's tournament in Chicago, that is where the Pistons went, and won it three straight times, unparalleled before or after.

When the National Basketball League was the major league, the Pistons went there and dominated. When the Basketball Association of America came into being, postwar, with the nation's biggest playing sites, there was a competitive stir. On the surface there was peaceful coexistence between the NBA and BAA, but there were heavy undercurrents questioning survival.

The NBL unquestionably had the best players and, with lower overheads, more stability. The BAA was shaky, having lost four of its original 11 franchises the first year and dropping from a 60 to 48-game schedule the second year. Crafty BAA Commissioner Maurice Podoloff knew that Fort Wayne was the rock-solid foundation of the National League through the years, and the Zollners would be a valuable ally for pro basketball's survival kit.

Carl Bennett was responsible for programming the Piston sports programs. He always had been Fred Zollner's representative on the NBL board of directors and from confidential meetings with Podoloff, which were never made public nor confirmed, the blueprint for what would eventually become the National Basketball Association was drawn up.

Podoloff visited Fort Wayne in the early spring of 1948, and at a meeting in Bennett's home, made a proposal which would have Fort Wayne, Minneapolis and Indianapolis jumping from the NBL to the BAA. Minneapolis, with basketball's biggest name, George Mikan, was the key. Indianapolis fit because the general manager was president of the NBL. The vast potential of the BAA's big arenas was the lure.

The proposal was significant because it would make the BAA the big league. The next year would be a shake-out year (1948-49) and the BAA could pick up the survivors. So the NBA may have been launched officially on August 3, 1949, but it really started at a private meeting between Podoloff and Bennett in the spring of 1948. The proposal was approved by Fred Zollner in confidence the next morning and was formalized May 10, 1948, at a joint meeting between the two leagues in Chicago.

By the May 10 date, owner Les Harrison of the Rochester Royals had cajoled an invitation from the BAA, so it was a four-team jump to the existing eight-team BAA lineup. Both Oshkosh and Toledo applied for BAA franchises but their bids were tabled.



The beginning of the National Basketball Association happened in Fort Wayne at the home of Carl Bennett, far left. Others pictured L to R are Maurice Podoloff, Paul Walk and Frank Kautsky. The latter two men were co-owners of the Indianapolis team and Podoloff emerged as president of the NBA.

It may have been pro ball's most hectic single day. NBL Commissioner Ward (Piggy) Lambert resigned; Leo Ferris of Tri-Cities replaced Paul Walk as National League President; Doxie Moore, former Sheboygan coach, was named NBL commissioner and Carl Bennett was named to the executive committee of the BAA.

When the dust cleared on May 10 the BAA had New York, Providence, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Washington and Boston in the Eastern Division; Minneapolis, Rochester, Chicago, St. Louis, Fort Wayne and Indianapolis in the West.

The National League was left with Oshkosh, Sheboygan, Toledo, Anderson, Tri-Cities, Syracuse, Flint and a pending Chicago application.

Al Cervi, who had jumped from Rochester to Syracuse as player-coach, thought the manoeuver saved the BAA from going out of business. He said that the real strength in basketball had been in the NBL, and that the BAA was merely a junior version. It had been tottering and was saved by the four teams which jumped leagues.¹⁴

Ben Tenny, writing in the *Fort Wayne News-Sentinel* of May 12, 1948, said that the Zollners "had become sick and tired of the wishy-washy manner in which the NBL operated, the insecurity they always felt in its operations and the squabbles which usually featured NBL sessions. The BAA and its big-time business way of conducting meetings and all of its operations offered surcease from that constant jumpy feeling they had in the NBL."

Bennett said: "Now that it's over, we have no regrets at all that we made the move to the BAA.... We know where we stand at all times in the BAA and that's something we never did in the NBL."

Indianapolis, still strapped for cash, sold the contract of its highest scorer, Leo Klier, to Fort Wayne as the Pistons revved up their player personnel for the new league. Shortly after the deal, Frank Kautsky, one of the pro game's pioneers and the man for whom the Indianapolis team was named, sold his interest and the Kautskys became the Indianapolis Jets.

Ike Duffey, owner of the Anderson Packers, succeeded Ferris as the NBL president. In July Podoloff and Bennett met with Duffey to stop the feuding between the leagues. Podoloff thought he had worked out a tentative agreement of interleague cooperation, but as Podoloff later wrote:

¹⁴ Robert Peterson, *Cages to Jump Shots*, p.166.

"After Mr. Duffey had left the room, Mr. Bennett found on one of the tables in the room, the following in Mr. Duffey's hand-writing: 'Members, Executive Board, National Basketball League: No possible chance agreement with BAA stop Consider yourself free to operate as you see fit in contacting and signing any of their players stop Ike W. Duffey, President NBL.'"¹⁵

There was little warfare on contracts as most teams had their rosters fairly well set, but the BAA banned the NBL teams from their arenas and forbade BAA teams to play them. The battle was effectively over, but the NBL would not throw in the towel.

The BAA schedule was back to 60 games, which the Pistons had played the previous years in the NBL. The difference was that BAA rules called for 48-minute games (four 12-minute quarters). It was eight minutes more per game than the Zollners had encountered before.

The Pistons started out the season with a roster of Jack Smiley, Bob Tough, Curly Armstrong, Richie Niemiera, Klier, Dick Triptow, Blackie Towery, Walt Kirk, Bob Kinney, John Pelkington and Ralph Hamilton. Whiz Kid Ken Menke had opted to take a high school coaching job at Galesburg, Illinois. In the off-season the Pistons also hired a full-time trainer, Stan Kenworthy, for both the softball and basketball teams, home and away. It is believed that they were the first basketball team to have a full-time trainer.

Even though travel expenses would be up, the Pistons kept their ticket prices the same, \$1.75 and \$1.50, \$50.75 and \$43.50 for season tickets to the 29 home games. Each team in the league chipped in one home date to give to the Chicago Stags for their double-headers.

Eight pre-season games against the Chicago Stags and Indianapolis Jets prepped the Pistons for their BAA premiere, which saw New York at Fort Wayne on November 3. The Knicks had one of basketball's great names as coach, Joe Lapchick, familiar to many Fort Wayne fans when he toured with the New York Celtics.

New York won the game at North Side, 80-76. It started a downhill slide in the Pistons' big league debut that would lead to the worst season in Piston history. They went to St. Louis and lost to the Bombers, 65-55, and came back to North Side for an upsetting loss to Buddy Jeannette's Baltimore Bullets, 78-77. Ex-Piston Chick Reiser poured in 20 points to help Baltimore, the defending champs of the BAA.

¹⁵ quoted in Robert Peterson, *Cages to Jump Shots*, p.164.

A three-game road schedule lay ahead and the Z's were whipped by Providence and Boston. When the team pulled into Washington, there was a telephone call awaiting Carl Bennett from Fred Zollner. Zollner relieved Bennett of his coaching responsibilities, named him athletic director and chief scout and appointed Curly Armstrong as player-coach. It was a deeply disappointing start for the whole Zollner organization, which had worked so hard to make the jump to the BAA a significant part of Fort Wayne basketball history.

Zollner's official statement was conciliatory, but Bennett realized that his duties were being diluted. "We have had a change such as this in mind for some time," Zollner explained, "And perhaps the decision has been hastened by the amazing display of strength of other teams in the BAA. We need someone to devote much of his time to the scouting of new talent. We need to keep pace with the other BAA clubs who have had scouts out for two years, resulting in strong ball clubs now bearing the fruits of these efforts. In our other league perhaps we were too complacent with our position. For that reason we thought a change should be made now rather than wait until later in the season or the end of the year. A change now allows us to start our scouting program immediately with the start of the college season. In the meantime we will make every effort to strengthen this year's club."

Armstrong debuted November 13, in Uline Arena against the league-leading Capitols. Washington won 80-71; the Caps were 6-0, and the Pistons returned to North Side Gym last in the league with a 0-6 record. It was the most games the Pistons had ever lost in succession.

A hurry-up call went out to bring in Ward Williams, Indiana's MVP in 1948. Williams had been drafted by the Pistons but had opted not to play pro ball. He arrived for the November 14 game against Indianapolis and chipped in five points as the Pistons won their first BAA game over Indianapolis, 79-73.

Souvenir program sales must have been good for the Piston concessionaires. That's about the only way the fans could keep up with roster changes. Keeping Fred's promise, the Zollners were making every effort to keep up the BAA pace.

Within a month after the coaching change the Z's had brought in Western Michigan star Dillard Crocker for a trial. He lasted one road trip of three games and later wound up in the National League with Anderson.

Big John Pelkington, a six-year fixture for Fort Wayne, was traded to Baltimore for Leo Mogus, back from service after starring for Youngstown in the old NBL. In a blockbuster deal, the Pistons sent

veteran Blackie Towery (one of the original Pistons), Walt Kirk and home town hero Ralph Hamilton to Indianapolis for six-foot eight John Mahnken and the Jets' player-coach, Bruce (Slick) Hale. BAA publicist J. Walter Kennedy called it the biggest player deal that had happened in the BAA.

Before leaving town, Towery had made another first for Fort Wayne. Podoloff fined him \$50 for touching Referee Jim Biersdorfer. It was the first player fine in the league.

Still trying to strengthen their big men, the Pistons lured six foot ten Bill Henry, an All-American from Rice, into a Fort Wayne uniform. He had been selling insurance and playing independent ball since graduation.

Midway in the season, in a move which owner Walter Brown said helped save the Boston franchise, Bob Kinney's contract was sold to the Celtics and a week later the Pistons bought Charlie Black from the Indianapolis Jets.

The National League jumpers had proven their point of having the best basketball talent when Rochester (45-15) and Minneapolis (44-16) led the regular season standings. The Pistons never adjusted from their 0-6 start and went through 19 players as they tried to get back on track. Fort Wayne had its worst year of basketball (22-38), eight games below .500 and missed the league playoffs for the first time.

The previous year they were only four games back of Rochester and three back of Minneapolis. Indianapolis fared worse (18-42). The Providence Steamrollers brought up the rear, 12-48.

Big George Mikan led all scorers in the league with 1698 points, a 28.2 points-per-game average. Next was Philadelphia's Joe Fulks. In the playoffs, Mikan had 42 in one game against Washington and averaged 30.3 PPG as Minneapolis stormed to the championship in 10 playoff games.

Washington eliminated Philadelphia in two; Rochester beat St. Louis; New York defeated Baltimore, the defending champs, and the Lakers whipped Chicago. In the semifinals, Minneapolis beat Rochester two straight and the Capitols disposed of New York, two out of three. The championship series went to the Lakers over Washington, four games to two.

Meanwhile in the National League, Murray Mendenhall's Anderson Duffey Packers raced to the championship. The NBL wound up with Anderson, Syracuse, Hammond, the Dayton Rens, Oshkosh, Tri-

Cities, Sheboygan, Waterloo (Iowa) and Denver. The Rens had filled out the season for the Detroit Vagabond Kings, who had lasted only 19 games.

Mendenhall's lineup consisted of Ed Stanczak, Milo Komenich, Howie Schultz, Frankie Brian, Boag Johnson, Bill Closs, John (Shotgun) Hargis, Frank Gates, Dillard Crocker and Bud Mendenhall, names that had been or would be very familiar in Fort Wayne.

In the playoffs, Syracuse beat Hammond; Tri-Cities beat Sheboygan and lost to Oshkosh; Anderson beat Syracuse, 3-1, and Oshkosh, 3-0, the finale an 88-64 romp at Anderson.

The dismal Fort Wayne season was brightened by two memorable wins over Minneapolis. In early December George Mikan set a North Side scoring record with 44 points, but the rest of his Laker team only added 30 more and Fort Wayne beat them, 84-74. In late January, Mikan was held to a season-low 14 points and the Pistons whipped the Lakers, 74-50. The crowd enjoyed Mikan's friendly gesture by walking to the Fort Wayne bench to congratulate Henry on his fine defensive job, after Henry had fouled out.

Despite a slow start when the Pistons could not sell out even for their BAA opener, and despite their ugly won-lost record, the Piston management announced an eight percent increase in attendance figures, indicating that the Fort Wayne fans liked the BAA.

The BAA hurried up the college draft because of the feuding over players with the NBL. The Pistons' top five draft picks were, in order: Bob Harris, Oklahoma A&M; Johnny Oldham, Western Kentucky; Fred Schaus, West Virginia; Jerry Nagel, Loyola; Dal Zuber, Fort Wayne and Toledo U. In all, the Pistons selected negotiation rights to 16 collegians as they desperately sought to rebuild their club with younger talent.

Fred Zollner saved his biggest surprise until six weeks after the end of the season. On April 26, he announced the signing of Murray Mendenhall as head coach. Curly Armstrong stepped down to devote his full attention to playing. Mendenhall, veteran mentor at Fort Wayne's Central High School, was riding high after leading the Anderson Duffey Packers to the 1948-49 championship.

Zollner insisted Armstrong's decision was made at the end of the season and was not made public because it might hamper the Zollner search for a new coach.

His statement read: "After due consideration, we felt Curly was right because he's still too valuable a player to be burdened with the extra duties of coaching. After careful screening of several of the leading coaches whom we believed we could obtain, we decided that we could not

make a better choice than to bring Murray Mendenhall right back where he had long been recognized as one of the finest coaches of the game. When we learned from him that his contract there was expiring and that he wanted to join us, there no longer was any doubt but that was the correct move."

The move was very popular in Fort Wayne, but it probably did not help the simmering feud between the NBL and the BAA. The Pistons had stolen the coach of the NBL champion Packers from Ike Duffey, owner of the franchise and the president of the National League. The National League countered by giving a franchise to the University of Kentucky stars (Ralph Beard, Alex Groza, Cliff Barker, Wah Wah Jones) and leased Butler Fieldhouse out from under the BAA Indianapolis Jets. The new team was to play as the Indianapolis Olympians, a name symbolic of their collegiate success winning the 1948 Olympics.

Nineteen players wore Zollner Piston uniforms in 1948-49, a far cry from the days when eight players carried the whole season five years before.

1949-50

Pro basketball's off-court battling practically upstaged the on-court play. There were even some procedural in court.

A contract settlement dispute launched by George Glamack forced the Indianapolis Jets into bankruptcy. The National League had snagged the Indianapolis Olympians and that may have proven the trump card as both the BAA and NBL tried to work out their differences.

The battle for players' contracts was proving financially futile. Confusion was rampant. Notre Dame star Leo Barnhorst signed a BAA contract without a team designation, assuming there would be a franchise in Indianapolis. Alex Groza, already a partner with the NBL Olympians, signed a BAA contract then returned it saying he "didn't understand the legal implications." It was chaotic.

After fruitless negotiations in May and June, white flags began to fly in July from both the NBL and BAA camps. The NBL had strengthened its position by signing two of the Chicago Stags' top draft choices, Dike Eddleman of Illinois and Jack Kerris of Loyola, to Tri-Cities contracts. These, plus the coup setting up the Indianapolis Olympians, caught the attention of the BAA.

Tri-Cities' Leo Ferris, Anderson's Ike Duffey and Sheboygan's Magnus Brinkman offered the olive branch. They suggested merging the two leagues. Finally, Commissioner Podoloff had herded all the teams under one tent, 10 from the BAA (leaving the Indianapolis Jets out) and eight from the NBL (with the Indianapolis Olympians in). Lon Darling of Oshkosh considered moving his franchise to Milwaukee but later decided to withdraw, giving the new National Basketball Association a 17-team league. It was curious that the merger eliminated two of pro basketball's pioneers, Darling and Frank Kautsky.

Drawing up a schedule for a league that stretched from Boston to Denver was a nightmare.

Podoloff was named president of the NBA; Duffey was elected chairman of the Board of Governors. The executive committee was Walter Brown of Boston, Ned Irish, Carl Bennett and Leo Ferris.

The 17 teams were split into three divisions. In the Eastern section were New York, Washington, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Boston (from the BAA) and Syracuse from the NBL. In the Central division were Minneapolis, Fort Wayne, Rochester, Chicago and St. Louis. The Western division entirely consisted of former NBL teams, Indianapolis, Denver, Waterloo, Anderson, Tri-Cities and Sheboygan. *The Official NBA Basketball Encyclopedia* described the playing arrangements this way: "The schedule was complicated. The new clubs would play the 10 holdovers from the 1948-49 BAA season only twice each and each other seven times each for a total of 62 games. The Eastern and Central teams would play each other six times each, which meant 68 games. But Syracuse, Anderson, Tri-Cities and Indianapolis added a couple of extra games among themselves, giving them 64 apiece. Furthermore, Syracuse, even though playing a Western schedule, was listed in the Eastern Division standings — a division in which it played only 10 games."¹⁶

The Pistons went about the business of transforming the lost mystique of McDermott through the ministry of Mendenhall. Bruce Hale did not fit into Mendenhall's plans and his contract was offered for sale or trade. Indianapolis grabbed it.

The team's official practice did not start until September 27, but for those players in town there were secret workouts in late summer. Several players had summer work either at Zollner Stadium or in Piston promotional jobs. Of the draftees, Schaus, Oldham and Zuber had played service basketball with Armstrong at Great Lakes Naval Station.

¹⁶ 1989 ed., p.50.

Schaus, the number three pick, was considered a steal because Bennett knew that he was willing to forego his last year of college eligibility at West Virginia to turn pro. Veterans Leo Klier and Bob Tough were holdouts, which had been an unknown word in the Piston vocabulary. Klier signed before the nine-game exhibition schedule and Tough's contract was peddled to Baltimore.

Rookies Wendell Beck of Manchester College and Dick Williams of North Illinois Teachers College were the first rookies cut. Next to exit were Fort Wayne natives Dal Zuber and Lloyd (Lefty) Doehrman and Charlie Parsley of Western Kentucky.

Six-year pro veteran Clint Wager, who had formerly been with Oshkosh and Hammond, signed on for a tryout. Mendenhall continued to mold his own team and cut Jack Smiley and popular Dick Triptow from the squad. Smiley caught on with Anderson and Triptow, a seven year pro veteran, played a few games with Baltimore, then retired.

The next signee was veteran Bob Carpenter, who was a star at Oshkosh when the Pistons broke into the league in 1941. The left-hander from East Texas State played in the shadow of Cowboy Edwards at Oshkosh and had recently become free, having played with the defunct Hammond NBL club.

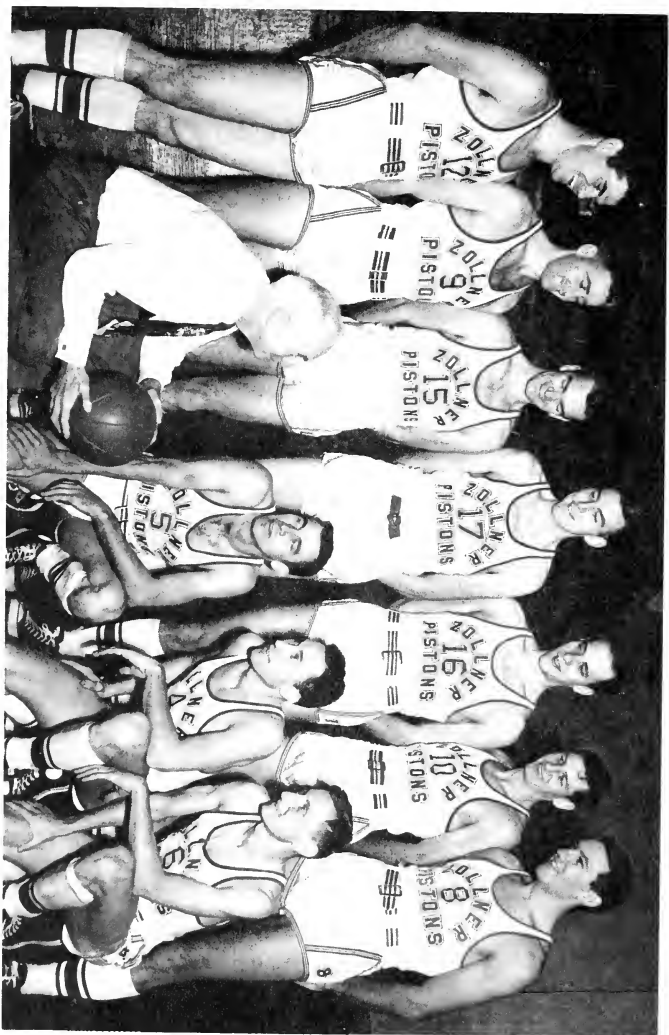
That left Mendenhall with only six players left over from the 1948-49 club: Black, Niemiera, Henry, Armstrong, Klier and Mahnken. The four freshmen were Schaus, Oldham, Harris and Nagel, plus the 'new' veterans, Wager and Carpenter. The latter two were almost family, having played together so long and against the Pistons so often.

Mendenhall's start as coach was a little rocky as the Z's lost their first four exhibition games. But after the player tryouts and newer acquisitions, the Pistons smoothed out and won their next five and settled in for the opener of a 34-game home schedule against the New York Knicks on November 3.

Rookie Schaus led all scorers in the nine exhibition games. Fans responded well to the renewed spark of the Zollners and tickets, still priced at \$1.75, \$1.50 and \$1.25, became premium items. It was a turnaway crowd for the Chicago Stags in the second game after New York fell in the opener, 85-75.

In fact, the Z's won four of their first five games and by November 21, the Fort Wayne *News-Sentinel* had a headline "It's No Dream! Pistons Lead!"

Mendenhall's youth movement continued. After the win over the Chicago Stags (87-70), Jack Kerris became available from Tri-Cities and



Zoller Pistons, 1949-50. Standing L to R: Art Burris, Jim Riffey, Jack Kerris, Don Otten, Larry Fousi, Bob Carpenter, Fred Schaus. Kneeling coach Murray Mendenthal, Boag Johnson, Johnny Oldham, Duane Klueh.

the Pistons grabbed him in exchange for veteran John Mahnken. Kerris had led Loyola to the NIT championship and had been a prize draft pick. Kerris had chosen the Blackhawks of the National League over Chicago of the BAA when he turned pro. Kerris often laughed about getting an extra \$1,000 in his contract for his NIT play against Kentucky's Alex Groza, a game which later turned out to be one of the Kentucky "point shaving" games, for which Groza and Ralph Beard would be banned from basketball.

By early December the Pistons' fast start enabled them to keep pace in the Central Division, acknowledged as the toughest of the league. At 9-5, they were third behind Chicago (14-5) and Minneapolis (11-5), but ahead of Rochester (10-6) and Syracuse (9-9).

Generally, things around the league were not smooth. Showboat officiating, too many fouls, huge home court advantages and the domination of Mikan-sized big men were creating a lack of customer appeal.

Podoloff blew a shrill whistle on his referees, telling them to, "cut the ham actions which belong more properly on the burlesque stage." Up to 100 fouls were being whistled in games and the fourth quarter was an endless parade to the 15-foot stripe. An emergency Board of Governors meeting was called. The board recommended a five-minute rule in the fourth quarter to decrease fouling (a jump ball after successful free throws), putting two defensive players closest to the basket on free throw attempts, and widening the free throw lane from six to 12 feet.

The first two recommendations were accepted on a 30-day trial basis, but the strong lobby of the Minneapolis Lakers prevailed and the foul lanes stayed at six-feet. It would be another two years to get that much-needed rule.

Bennett, a member of the NBA's Executive Council, along with New York's persuasive Ned Irish, did not like losing the widening-of-the-lane-rule. Irish said: "This will open up the game. Right now all the teams use a collapsible defense to eliminate cutting and driving, the most interesting part of the game to spectators, is almost vanishing."

The Pistons played three exhibition games in Huntington, Wabash and Peru, putting tape on the floor for a 12-foot foul lane and liked the result. Slater Martin, back court star in Minneapolis, told of the Lakers reaction: "They were always trying to make rules to get Mikan out of the game.... We experimented with this twelve-foot basket and couldn't even throw the ball up there. From the free throw line, you couldn't get it up

there. You can't imagine how much arch you gotta put on the ball to get it up twelve feet."¹⁷

By Christmas the Pistons were still hanging tough, sharing the Central Division lead (14-8) with Rochester. Chicago was third with 18-11 and Minneapolis fourth at 16-10. Mikan and Groza were battling for the league scoring lead with Big George ahead 741-729. Fort Wayne's Schaus was 11th with 350, a 15.2 average, the highest points-per-game in Zollner history.

The persistent Lakers went on a 12-2 run and were chasing Rochester for the Central Division lead as the teams passed the midway point in the schedule. The Fort Wayne-Anderson player shuttle started anew as the Pistons traded Charlie Black and Richie Niemiera to the Packers for Howie Schultz and Boag Johnson on January 18.

Schultz, former Brooklyn Dodger and Philadelphia Philly first baseman, and Johnson had both played for Mendenhall when Anderson won the National League championship. In an ironic twist, in his swan song Charlie Black had helped the Pistons beat Sheboygan, 73-72. After the game, Black and Niemiera were told of the trade. In Fort Wayne-Anderson dealings the past few seasons eight players had worn both uniforms — Black, Niemiera, Charlie Shipp, Milo Komenich, Frank Gates, Elmer Gainer, Walt Kirk and Jack Smiley. Johnson was from neighboring Huntington College and had blossomed into a pro star under Mendenhall's guidance.

Black and Niemiera were popular players and there was considerable skepticism over the trade, particularly when the club went 5-8 to drop into fourth place. The Pistons bought from Denver the contract of Duane Klueh, former Indiana State star, and sold 6-foot-10 Bill Henry to Tri-Cities. Klueh perked up the Pistons in a sensational 92-84 win at Rochester. It was the first Zollner win there since the 1945-46 season and one that broke the Royals' 23-game home winning streak. Klueh scored 10 points in the upset.

The Central Division had a peculiar finish. Rochester and Minneapolis finished in a first place tie with 51-17 records. Fort Wayne and Chicago tied for third with 40-28. Single game playoffs resulted in Minneapolis beating Rochester and the Pistons took third with an 86-69 win over Chicago, sending the Lakers against the Stags and the Zollners against the Royals.

¹⁷ Charles Salzberg, *From Set Shot to Slam Dunk*, p.70.

Fort Wayne stunned Rochester 90-84 at Rochester and a 79-78 overtime game in Fort Wayne eliminated the Royals. Minneapolis took Chicago out in two straight. The Lakers then knocked Fort Wayne out in the Central Division finals, 93-79 and 89-82. Anderson won the Western Division playoffs, Syracuse the East and Minneapolis eventually won the NBA's first championship winning four of six from Syracuse in the title series.

Fred Schaus became the first Fort Wayne player to score more than 1,000 points in a season (including five playoff games). His total was 1,085. Schaus was named Rookie of the Year and to the all-NBA team. Again, 19 players had worn the Zollner uniform during the campaign: Schaus, Carpenter, Schultz, Armstrong, Johnson, Kerris, Harris, Klueh, Klier, Oldham, Wager, Nagel, Mahnken, Black, Niemiera, Tough, Henry, Englund and Smiley. Zollner had the rights to Gene Englund, but released them to the Boston Celtics.

The Pistons started gearing for the next season by buying the contract of Johnny (Shotgun) Hargis from the Anderson Packers.

On April 10 Anderson withdrew from the NBA. Podoloff had requested all franchises to post a \$50,000 performance bond, specifying they would open the 1950-51 season. On the deadline date Denver, Sheboygan and Waterloo quit, too, and contemplated returning to a National League with Doxie Moore as commissioner.

In the college draft the Zollners drafted George Yardley, the stunning Stanford star; Jim Riffe, Tulane; Art Burris, Tennessee; Billy Joe Adcock, Vanderbilt; Carl Henningson, Northwest Mississippi; Ed Jones, Tennessee; Ed Thompson, Kent State; Bob Metcalfe, Valparaiso; and Lee Rzeszeski, Indiana State.

In those simpler days before long-distance telephone calls were common, the players heard the news of their draft via telegram. The message sent to Yardley at Stanford was brief:

"Fort Wayne of the National Basketball Assn. drafted you. Please call me collect late Tuesday or Wednesday at Harrison 9426 or Anthony 3264. Also advise Coach Dean of our choice.

Fort Wayne Zollner Pistons Carl Bennett."

There were still a lot of growing pains ahead for the National Basketball Association as it wobbled into its second full season. Fort Wayne's Zollner Pistons were encouraged by Murray Mendenhall's first year as coach of the Z's. After their dismal debut in the Basketball Association of America two years before, Mendy got them back on the winning track in the NBA inaugural year with a 40-28 mark.

The Pistons had finished fourth in the unwieldy 17-team NBA compared to 10th in the BAA's 12-team league in 1948-49. The best four teams in the NBA, Syracuse, Minneapolis, Rochester and Fort Wayne, were refugees from the old National Basketball League and had trimmed all the big-arena rivals.

When the \$50,000 cash performance bond was invoked, cash-and-carry Fred Zollner was the first to ante up. He did not want his Pistons on the small town side of the ledger. Commissioner Maurice Podoloff's sifting had already erased Anderson, Sheboygan, Denver and Waterloo. By mid-summer St. Louis had folded its tent and the new twelve-team schedule was drawn up with Abe Saperstein, owner of the Harlem Globetrotters, pondering the purchase of the Chicago Stags.

Mendenhall was continually shuffling his roster in an effort to keep the winning momentum. Jerry Nagel, 12th man the previous year, was released. He had played in only 14 of the team's 73 games in 1949-50 but was kept on the squad, dressing only when other players were on the injured list.

Center Howie Schultz opted to go to the National Professional Basketball League near his hometown, St. Paul, as part owner and coach of a new franchise and Clint Wager was put on waivers. The college draft had not been helpful. The number one pick, George Yardley, decided to play with the AAU Stewart Chevrolets of San Francisco. He was up soon for a military call and, by staying amateur, would have a shot at the 1952 Olympics.

The NBA's growing pains mounted when Saperstein backed out of his deal to buy the Chicago Stags. This happened in early October. Tickets were sold, schedules printed for a 12-team season, but the Board of Governors had to regroup, start over again and come up with a 66-game schedule for 11 teams: Philadelphia, Boston, New York, Syracuse, Washington and Baltimore in the East; Minneapolis, Rochester, Fort Wayne, Indianapolis and Tri-Cities in the West.

Dispersal of the Chicago players was a big help in strengthening the manpower among the 11 remaining clubs. The Pistons got Larry Foust, a six foot nine bloomer from LaSalle. He and the six foot ten Charlie Share were the biggest plums in the draft, but Share, Boston's number one pick, had signed with Waterloo in the NPBL.

Share remembered, "I was attending Bowling Green in Ohio when the Celtics drafted me. I found out when I read it in the *Toledo Blade*. I was contacted by Boston and I signed, I forgot for how much. Then I was contacted by a team from Waterloo, Iowa, that played in the National Professional Basketball League. They put \$2500 on the table and said, 'If you sign with us, you can take this money with you now.' I was engaged and \$2,500 was a lot of money, so I signed with them, too. I even played with Waterloo for a month, then the league folded.

"My rights went back to the Celtics, and Auerbach sold me to Fort Wayne. ...I had to sit out the rest of the 1950-51 season anyway."¹⁸

With all of the front office excitement about folding franchises, the start of the new league, and hassles over player contracts, integration moved into the NBA with little fanfare. An unofficial straw vote among the Board of Governors showed a 6-5 rejection of signing black players into the NBA. This was partially in deference to Abe Saperstein, who thought he had exclusive rights over the black players. To act against him would have alienated basketball's best draw, the Globetrotters. Some of the owners were also apprehensive about African-American players being good for the NBA turnstiles and predominantly white fans.

The decisive action of the Knicks' Ned Irish eventually changed things. According to Carl Bennett, Irish told the Board of Governors that he wanted approval to buy Sweetwater Clifton from the Globetrotters. He said that the new players would help win ball games. Another unofficial vote reversed the figures, 6-5 in favor.¹⁹ Thus the color line was crossed after this 1950 meeting. Irish signed Clifton; Boston drafted Chuck Cooper of Duquesne; and Bones McKinney, Washington's coach, took Earl Lloyd of West Virginia State in the draft. The first black player to take the floor in the NBA was Lloyd in Washington against Rochester on October 31, 1950. The other two made their debuts in Fort Wayne's North Side Gym the same week — Cooper with Boston and Clifton with the Knicks. It went practically unnoticed in the press, nothing like the huge

¹⁸ quoted in Terry Pluto, *Tall Tales*, p.107.

¹⁹ Robert W. Peterson, *Cages to Jump Shots*, p.170-71.

to-do when Branch Rickey brought Jackie Robinson up to the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947.

Blacks had played in the old National League — Dolly King and Pop Gates for Rochester and in 1948-49, Gates brought his entire New York Rens team to finish out the season for the Dayton Gems when the Gems disbanded.

The first black to play for Fort Wayne was in 1955 when Jesse Arnelle, of Penn State, was the Pistons' top draft choice. He played only 33 games.

Bennett lined up a tough training schedule of 12 exhibition games.

Training camp boiled down to this roster: Curly Armstrong, Art Burris, Bob Carpenter, Larry Foust, John Hargis, Bob Harris, Al Henningsen, Boag Johnson, Jack Kerris, Leo Klier, Duane Klueh, Johnny Oldham, Jim Riffey and Fred Schaus. Midway into the exhibition schedule waivers were asked on Klier and he eventually wound up with Anderson in the NPBL.

The Pistons won just four of the 12 exhibitions and pared down to the limit of a 12-player roster by releasing Rookie Al Henningsen prior to a league opener at home against Boston. One of the interesting exhibitions was a game against Anderson of the NPBL as the NBA waived its non-competitive rule for interleague play because it was practically an "alumni" game. Ex-Piston Frank Gates was coaching Anderson and four other Fort Wayners — Charlie Black, Milo Komenich, Bob Kinney and Richie Niemiera — started the game against the Pistons. Fortunately for Mendenhall, the Pistons coasted to a 87-74 win, leading by as much as 24 in the fourth quarter.

The November 1 opener against the Celtics had some historic significance. Besides Chuck Cooper (one of three to break the color line) playing his first NBA game, it was also the first NBA game for Bob Cousy, whom Terry Pluto in *Tall Tales* called "the first piece of the Celtics Dynasty." Neither Cousy's team-leading 16 points nor Cooper's appearance rated a mention in Bob Reed's account of the game in the November 2 Fort Wayne *Journal-Gazette*. Plenty was said about the Pistons, who set a North Side team scoring record in brushing Boston, 107-84, with rookie Larry Foust's 21 points leading five others in double digit scoring.

An Historic Game

Mendenhall was a run and gun, hurry-style Hoosier coach. On Thanksgiving Eve (November 22, 1950) the Zollners invaded Minneapolis. Mendy told the Pistons to put on the brakes and "see what happens."

What happened, and quite inadvertently, was a historic game in pro basketball annals. The defending NBA champion Lakers had not been beaten at home in a year, and had won 29 in a row. They were in a tight scuffle in the Central Division. They had beaten the Pistons seven straight times in Minneapolis and on this occasion attracted their biggest crowd of the season, 7012.

The Pistons won 19-18. It is secure in the NBA record books as the lowest score in National Basketball Association history and it became the catalyst for the 24-second clock, considered the most significant rule ever made by basketball, both for spectators and competitiveness.

Fred Schaus remembered that one of the main factors was the narrow court in Minneapolis. Facing George Mikan, Vern Mikkelson and Jim Pollard (The Kangaroo Kid), the Pistons could not get in. The idea was to force the Lakers to come out. "They didn't come out, so we didn't go in." Foust handled the ball most of the time. Slater Martin recalled that the Lakers were ahead at half-time, and pressed the Pistons to play a more regular game. The Z's stuck to their plan, however, and continued to hold the ball.²⁰

The fans were furious. At some point, they began to throw things on the court, and shout at Mendenhall. Schaus laughed later, "Mendy was a tough little competitor. He loved it."

President Podoloff called for a probe. Countercharges by both teams accused the Lakers of using an illegal zone defense, but there was no rule against stalling. Robert W. Peterson in *Cages to Jump Shots* points out that "within days the NBA instituted a rule calling for a technical foul for obvious stalling, thus making the 19-18 game safe in the record books for all time as the lowest game score in the NBA."²¹

Pistons playing in the freak, historical game were Schaus, Jack Kerris, Foust, Bob Harris, Johnny Hargis, Boag Johnson, John Oldham and Curly Armstrong. Mikan scored 15 of the Lakers' 18 points, getting

²⁰ Terry Pluto, *Tall Tales* (1992), p.25.

²¹ p.180.

all four of the Minneapolis baskets. Fort Wayne had four baskets, too, with Foust, Hargis, Oldham and Armstrong each getting one.

The Pistons were ahead after the first quarter. Minneapolis led 13-11 at the half and 17-16 at the three quarters. There were only four points in the fourth period, one free throw by each club until Foust hit the winning basket with four seconds left. Oldham's five points led Fort Wayne's scoring, and for trying five shots, his mates kiddingly called him "the gunner."

Fort Wayne	G	F	T
Schaus f	0	3	3
Kerris f	0	2	2
Foust r	1	1	3
Oldham g	1	3	5
Harris g	1	0	2
Johnson g	0	0	0
Armstrong g	1	2	4
Harris g	0	0	0
Minneapolis	G	F	T
Mikkelson f	0	0	0
Pollard f	0	1	1
Mikan r	4	7	15
Martin f	0	0	0
Harrison g	0	0	0
Grant f	0	0	0
Hutton g	0	0	0
Ferrin g	0	0	0

(from *The Journal-Gazette*, November 22, 1950)

The 19-18 game opened a two-night series. The second game was in Fort Wayne Thanksgiving Night (November 23) and the Zollners had their first sellout of the season with the interest pumped by the 19-18 game the previous night. People even came to the train station to meet them when they returned from Minneapolis.

Fort Wayne whipped the Lakers 73-63 despite a 32-point performance by Mikan, and took the lead in the NBA's Western Division.

Always looking for help in the big man department, in December Fred Zollner got his billfold out again and bought the contract of the well-traveled Don Otten from the Baltimore Bullets and threw Hargis into the

deal. At six foot eleven, Otten was the tallest man in the game. Mendenhall and Bennett thought that he would be a good fireman to back up Foust and Kerris.

In the front office, publicity director Al Busse was drafted and Rodger Nelson returned from his sports editor's job in Columbus as assistant athletic director.

The nomad trail of Fort Wayne's "Mr. Basketball," Bobby McDermott, had led to Grand Rapids in the expanding NPBL. On November 20, 1950, he was banned from the league by Commissioner Doxie Moore for unbecoming conduct. His team had lost a 73-72 game to Denver in Casper, Wyoming. The *Journal-Gazette's* Bob Reed said the reason was, "repeated profanity to the officials" and ripping the doors off lockers in the dressing room after the game.

Reed wondered in his column, Sports Roundup, "Will this be the final chapter in the brilliant though often stormy career of Bob McDermott, basketball's greatest all-around player?"²² Mac died in 1963 and was inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame in 1987.

An 11-game home winning streak, which allowed the Z's to be in the thick of the Western Division race, was abruptly halted in mid-December when Dike Eddleman, brilliant All-American from Illinois, broke all of North Side's scoring records when he led the Tri-Cities Blackhawks to a 103-99 win. Eddleman's 48 points broke the 44-point record held by George Mikan. Ben Tenny of the *News-Sentinel* hailed it as one of the greatest individual offensive displays ever seen in basketball.

On December 20 the Pistons purchased the contract of Charlie Share from the Waterloo Hawks of the NPBL in the "biggest deal in the history of the pro cage sports." Two days earlier the Zollners had shipped popular Bob Harris to Boston for "cash and Dick Mehen."

These were the days of private negotiations, confidential player salaries and no player had an agent, so what transpired between the Zollners, Celtics, Waterloo, the NPBL, President Podoloff and the NBA Board of Governors may never be known, but it was not as simple as Fort Wayne buying Charlie Share from Waterloo.

Later, Red Auerbach said that there had been some money involved, but that he received the rights to Bill Sharman and Bob Harris in consideration.

Carl Bennett summoned a special Board of Governors meeting after Podoloff disapproved the deal for taking an NPBL player without

²² 21 November 1950, p.19.

NBA prior approval. Bennett had worked out the details with Waterloo and the NPBL. It seemed to boil down to the small-city—big-city friction within the league. The Pistons had the tallest team in basketball but the least clout in the league. The other NBA owners were emphasizing that they were not going to let Fred Zollner buy his way to a championship.

The Pistons got the rights to Sharman when the Washington Caps folded in January, but the future Basketball Hall of Famer also played baseball in the Brooklyn Dodger chain and instead of reporting to the Zollners, went back to California to get ready for spring training. Feeling he had lost Sharman to baseball forever, Bennett gave the Sharman rights to Boston, instead of the number one pick in the 1951 college draft. Auerbach, with a \$14,000 bonus sweetener, eventually brought Sharman back to basketball the next season and the famous back court duo of Cousy and Sharman was born.

Share remained in Fort Wayne and tried to stay in shape with a pick-up team called "Share's All-Stars," playing prelim games to the Pistons and exhibitions in surrounding towns. Charlie Share was the high scorer for Share's All-Stars.

Fred's cash outlay was never made public, but Waterloo was one of the few teams to survive the whole NPBL season. The tottering Boston franchise had enough cash to give Sharman his \$14,000 bonus. The Share controversy and the front office battles with the NBA brass apparently unnerved the ball club. After winning 11 of their first 12 home games, they won only six of the next 12 at North Side Gym. The Z's had dropped from a contending position with Minneapolis and Rochester into a third place scrap with Indianapolis.

A "Curly Armstrong Appreciation Night" was held February 7, honoring his 18 years of basketball excellence from Fort Wayne grade schools through the NCAA championship at Indiana and the pro career that started in 1941 with the Zollners.

On February 12 the Pistons put it all together at North Side Gym, walloping the New York Knicks, 120-96, the most team points ever scored there. Fort Wayne beat the player trading deadline by buying Ken Murray's contract from the Baltimore Bullets.

To get to the 10-player limit, with which they would finish the season, Mendenhall assigned Art Burris and Jim Riffey to their version of a farm team, Share's All-Stars.

The team record stood at 25-28 and the final roster had Armstrong, Oldham, Johnson, Klueh, Schaus, Mehen, Kerris, Foust, Otten and Murray.

On March 2, the NBA staged its first East-West All-Star game at the Boston Garden. The turnout of 10,094 was heartening to a league that was barely averaging 3,000 in its 10 surviving cities. Fort Wayne's leading scorers, Fred Schaus and Larry Foust, were chosen for the West All-Stars. The East won the game, 111-94. The Most Valuable Player award went to Boston's Easy Ed Macauley for his 20 points and for holding Mikan to four baskets. Schaus had eight and Foust two for the West. Indianapolis' Alex Groza had 17 points and 13 rebounds for the West.

The Indianapolis-Fort Wayne fight for third place went down to the last day of the season. The Pistons won it by beating Tri-Cities 95-82, as Rochester beat Indianapolis 91-79, giving the Z's a one-game lead. Their season was 32-36, Indianapolis, 31-37.

That set Fort Wayne against Rochester and the defending champ Minneapolis against the Olympians. Both series went the three-game limit, Fort Wayne losing to the Royals 110-81 in the opener, winning the second in Fort Wayne 83-78, then losing the finale at Rochester, 97-78. Rochester upset Minneapolis in the semifinals, winning three of four games while New York made the finals in two upsets, beating Boston and Syracuse.

The championship went to Rochester. The Royals won three straight, lost three and won the deciding game back in Rochester, 79-75.

It was a disappointing season for Fort Wayne, eight games behind their 1949-50 pace. The road record of 5-29 went with a home record of 27-7 and did not meet the expectations of Fred Zollner. The season ended March 24 in Rochester. Two weeks later Zollner bought up the remaining year of Murray Mendenhall's contract. It ended the 29-year coaching career of Mendenhall, who had never before gone through the experience of being fired.

One of the consolations of the season was the fact the Pistons were the only team to win the season series from the champion Lakers, 5-3, thanks to the epic, history-making 19-18 game in November.

Schaus became the first Piston to score more than 1000 points in the regular season. He had 1028 in 68 games, a 15.1 PPG average. Foust was next with 915, 13.5.

On March 28, Curly Armstrong announced his retirement from both the basketball and fastball teams. Tri-Cities owner Ben Kerner reported a loss of \$25,000 for the season. On April 3, Ben Tenny of the *News-Sentinel* wrote an unconfirmed story reporting that the Pistons had purchased the contract of Tri-Cities leading scorer, Frank Brian. Brian's

purchase was confirmed a month later. The contracts of Dick Mehen and Howie Schultz, who had played with St. Paul in the NPBL, went to the Hawks in the deal.

Frank was pleased with the deal. "Everybody wanted to be in Fort Wayne," he explained, "They travelled first class. I was ready to go."

Brian was a graduate of Louisiana State and had not planned to play pro basketball. He was heading for a job with Philco when Murray Mendenhall, then at Anderson, convinced him to come up for a game or two. He talked him into staying. "I just couldn't turn him down," Brian said.

Brian had later moved on to Tri-Cities, but this deal looked as if it would reunite him with his old coach, Mendy.

By the time he arrived, Paul Birch, veteran of Fort Wayne's world championship teams, came back to Indiana to coach the Zollner Pistons.

1951-52

The dismissal of Mendenhall and the hiring of Birch had the surprise element that Zollner seemed to enjoy. In actuality, Bennett and Zollner had met with Birch in Toledo on April 7 and worked out the necessary details.

The following day, Mendenhall was summoned to Zollner Machine Works, where Bennett had to give him the bad news. The story was saved for Ben Tenny, sports editor of the afternoon *News-Sentinel* and a friend of Mendenhall. There were two days in which to speculate on Mendenhall's successor. Plenty of names bandied about, including Buddy Jeannette, Nat Holman, Clair Bee, Jerry Busch, Burl Friddle, Herm Schaefer, Red Holzman, Bobby Davies, Bones McKinney, Howie Schultz and even Bobby McDermott.

An upset Tenny warned in a column: "The final choice had better be a good one. In a league as tough as the NBA, it's not easy to develop or buy a championship."

More rule changes lay ahead, as the NBA continued to try to improve its product. After several years of lobbying, started by Bennett and Mendenhall, the twelve-foot foul lane was adopted. Minneapolis and Mikan were finally outvoted and a better game resulted.

Birch started his new career by scouting the championship series between Rochester and New York. The same fate that befell the Pistons four years later hit New York. The team could not play its championship game in Madison Square Garden because of a circus booking. It had to play Rochester in the Seventh Street Armory. They were beaten 4-3 in the series.

After the playoffs came the college draft, which had slim pickings. With the tallest team in the land (Otten 7', Share 6'11", Foust 6'9"), Birch and Bennett went to the back court and selected Zeke Sinicola of Niagara, Jack Riley of Syracuse and Jake Fendley of Northwestern. The prize plum in the draft was Mel Hutchins of Brigham Young, chosen by Tri-Cities.

Birch scheduled a get-acquainted spring training camp for mid-May to assess his roster talent and acquaint them with his style of coaching.

After he left Fort Wayne in 1946, Birch had gone on to Youngstown in the National League, to Pittsburgh in the Basketball Association of America, then back to Youngstown. His team won the conference there, before he moved to Erie of the American league. In between, he had helped Dudie Moore coach at his alma mater, Duquesne.

Birch's hold-up-the-ball style in the BAA led to the "No zone defense" rule in the 45 minute game, just as the Pistons' 19-18 win over Minneapolis had caused the "no stall" rule in the NBA. Birch's Pittsburgh team beat Washington in a 48-42 game in 1947, the lowest score in the pros until Fort Wayne's historic effort against the Lakers.

On 10 May, Curly Armstrong found work as coach of the Wabash College team, whose season would open against Notre Dame. Duane Klueh announced his retirement to go into high school coaching in Terre Haute, cutting Birch's spring training squad to Schaus, Oldham, Foust, Kerris, Johnson, Riffey, Burris, Share, Brian and Otten.

Simultaneously, Commissioner Doxie Moore waved the white flag and said the National Professional Basketball League was through. Only Anderson, Sheboygan and Waterloo survived the season. St. Paul, Kansas City, Grand Rapids and Denver had folded their tents.

The three Zollner college draftees, Sinicola, Kiley and Fendley, were named to the College All-Star team which would face the NBA champion Rochester Royals in the annual game in October at Chicago Stadium. The game was revered by Fort Wayne, whose Pistons had won two of three in the mid-forties as the professional champs before some of basketball's biggest crowds.

In his role as entrepreneur, Carl Bennett took a cue from the successful outdoor ice shows at Zollner Stadium and the portable basketball floors carried around the world by the Harlem Globetrotters. He decided to combine the opening of the fastball season with the closing of basketball spring training in an unusual outdoor mix on Memorial Day weekend. Some 6,000 fans were rained out on the Saturday night date, but, despite another washout on Monday, the unusual double-header took place on 2 June.

The intrasquad game took place before an estimated 4,200 fans. The Zollners (Schaus, Johnson, Foust, Kerris and Brian) beat the Pistons (Oldham, Riffey, Share, Burris and Bob Garrison, a draft tryout) 47-36. It was the Fort Wayne debut for 'Flash' Brian, who made 17 points.

In July, Herm Schaefer was named coach of the Indianapolis Olympians. Murray Mendenhall lost out in his bid to become supervisor of NBA officials to veteran Pat Kennedy. The Pistons' last purchase from the previous year, Ken Murray, went into the service.

Encouraged by the outdoor Memorial Day turnout for basketball, Bennett booked the Globetrotters into Zollner Stadium against an All-Star team coached by George Mikan in early September. The game attracted a large crowd, 6723.

Johnny Oldham had been on the bubble about his pro future and decided to return to Bowling Green, Kentucky, to coach high school ball, with a connection to the University of Western Kentucky. He would later become W.K.'s head basketball coach and athletic director.

In an important move, the Tri-Cities franchise was transferred to Milwaukee, where a new 10,000 seat coliseum had been built.

Five Piston players who had finished the 1950-51 season were no longer on the scene: Armstrong, Klueh, Murray, Oldham and Dick Mehen, who had been traded to Milwaukee in the Brian deal. Bennett had lined up an eight-game exhibition schedule, two each against Western Division foes. The Z's had bought some insurance from Boston in the form of Eddie Ehlers' contract. He was another of those multi-talented athletes who had options of basketball, baseball and even football. He sat out the previous year as he worked for the New York Yankees, but had decided on another fling in pro basketball.

While 16,805 fans watched, the Rochester Royals beat the College All-Stars 76-70.

Ralph Beard and Alex Groza were arrested for shaving points in the collegiate days at Kentucky. They were the blood and guts of the Indianapolis franchise and part owners of the team. The offenses had

taken place during their college days and had not affected their professional games, but they were expelled from the NBA anyway. Pro ball kept its skirts clean. The college sport was severely bruised by the scandals which had now embraced 34 players on seven different teams.

On 11 October, the Pistons sold the contract of Howie Schultz to Minneapolis. Birch's first game as coach was at Troy, Ohio, as the Lakers mauled the Pistons 77-58. It was the opposite in Kokomo the next night with the Pistons winning 85-54.

The Z's split the rest of their exhibitions with Rochester, Milwaukee and Indianapolis. When the Pistons cut to the NBA player limit, both Jim Riffe and Ehlers were dropped.

The opening NBA game for coach Birch was at Syracuse's new Onondaga War Memorial Coliseum, where 4520 fans watched the Nats spank the Zollners 90-75. Charlie Share's 21 points were encouraging. The Zollner Pistons, while anchored in Fort Wayne, would win only one game in the Syracuse Coliseum.

Fort Wayne finally broke the ice with an 84-75 win over New York in North Side gym. But their woes continued. Zeke Sinicola was drafted and the Pistons bought the contract of Bill Closs from Philadelphia. They lost nine of their first eleven games.

Ticket prices remained at \$1.50 for reserved seats, \$1.20 and 60 cents for students. There were few sellouts.

Don Otten's contract was sold to Milwaukee. In December, the Z's won their first road game, 91-88 at Boston. Bob Cousy had 32 points and Brian responded with 29.

The slow start was frustrating. Twenty-four games into the season, the Pistons had won only six games. Brian, Foust and Schaus were carrying the double-digit scoring load.

The won-lost record had backed the team into an unusual corner. Foust's fine play made him a necessary ingredient if the Pistons were to win games, but that slowed the development of Charlie Share. The league's enforced idleness the previous year had taken its toll in conditioning and Share, who was the Pistons' biggest investment, was unable to get enough playing time.

Birch's ball-control style had given the Pistons the second-best defensive record in the league, but also the league's second-worst offensive record.

At the halfway point of the season, Fort Wayne stood at 12-21. Both Brian and Foust were selected for the West in the second annual All-Star game at Boston on February 12. The other players were Mikan, Vern

Mikkelsen of Minneapolis, Rochester's Bob Davies and Bob Wanzer, Leo Barnhorst and Lefty Walther of Indianapolis, Jim Pollard of the Lakers and Dike Eddleman of Milwaukee.

Going into the All-Star break, the press started calling them "the Paradoxical Pistons." In the three games prior to the All-Star game, Fort Wayne lost two at home and won one away. They lost to Philadelphia at North Side 105-91, with Jumping Joe Fulks returning to his familiar form with 36 points. The Pistons went to Minneapolis and beat the Lakers 70-67, their first win there since the 19-18 game fourteen months before. Then they returned to Fort Wayne and lost to Baltimore 87-77. Former Piston Chuck Reiser, coaching the Bullets, used only five players the entire 48 minutes in the upset win.

Prior to that, the Pistons had pulled to within two games of Indianapolis, but were frustrated by a home upset against lowly Minneapolis 75-64. Don Otten played the whole game for the Hawks and had 24 points. Share, used sparingly, had four.

Continuing to make the biggest deals in basketball, Fred Zollner purchased the contract of Dike Eddleman from the Hawks on the eve of the All-Star game.

Eddleman had scored 48 points to set North Side's scoring record against the Pistons. With his famous "kiss shot", Dike was the greatest athlete turned out at the University of Illinois, winning eleven varsity letters in football, basketball and track. He was also a high jumper in the 1948 Olympic games.

Growing up in Centralia, Illinois, he had been aware of the Pistons and their star players, McDermott, Shipp and Pelkington. "I remember those guys way back when," he says, "What a great pro team."

While he was in the service, he had taken part in a college all-star game against the Z's, an exciting moment for a young man to play his boyhood heroes. He later said that his ambition had always been to be a Piston, and now he had the chance.

He learned his trademark "kiss shot" from A.L. Trout, his high school coach in Centralia. Trout would not allow any one-handed shooting, so Dike developed a two-handed shot, bringing the ball up near his nose, so that it looked as if he kissed it before he let fly.

Art Burris' contract went to Milwaukee, plus cash estimated in the double figures.

Larry Foust injured his foot in Minneapolis and missed the All-Star game. He was replaced by Rochester's Arnie Risen. The East, coached by Syracuse's Al Cervi won for the second year 108-91 as 10,211



PROBABLY THE BIG TEN'S GREATEST ALL-AROUND ATHLETE AS A STUDENT AT THE UNIV. OF ILLINOIS — HE WON MAJOR LETTERS IN FOOTBALL, BASKETBALL AND TRACK — WAS BIG TEN'S OUTSTANDING PUNTER AND WON A BERTH ON THE U.S. OLYMPIC TEAM OF 1948 AS A HIGH JUMPER!

Bob Finner

FORT WAYNE, HERE I COME



CAME TO THE PISTONS LAST YEAR FROM MILWAUKEE

Dike EDDLEMAN

CURRENT SENSATION OF THE ZOLLNER PISTONS !!



watched. Paul Arizin was the game's most valuable player, with 26 points, matching Mikan's total. Fort Wayne's Brian had 13.

Carl Bennett put in Fort Wayne's bid to host the 1953 All-Star game in the Allen County Memorial Coliseum, which was under construction and would be ready for a fall opening.

Rochester and Minneapolis were in a heated contest for first place and a \$2500 team bonus in the Western Division, but the Pistons were unable to catch Indianapolis for third place. They were assured of a play-off berth, being comfortably ahead of fifth-place Milwaukee.

In an unusual promotion gimmick, Fort Wayne and Boston played a midnight basketball game on February 21 in Boston Garden so people who worked on the night shift could watch. The game followed a performance of Ice Follies. It must have been past the Pistons' bedtime, as they lost to the Celtics 88-67.

Rochester clinched the division championship 86-84 in Fort Wayne in the 65th game of the season. That set the Royals against the fourth place Pistons in the playoffs. Rochester knocked out Fort Wayne in two successive games, 95-78 and 92-86.

The Lakers took two from Indianapolis, then dethroned the Royals three games to one, to go into the NBA championship playoffs against New York. The surprising Knicks had eliminated Boston and Syracuse en route to the finals.

The series went the full seven games, including two overtimes, but the Lakers won back their championship with an 82-65 romp in the final game.

The Pistons wound up with a 29-37 record, three behind the pace of 1950-51. They still had woes on the road, winning only six of thirty away from home and one of three on neutral courts. Their North Side record was 22-11.

Fred Schaus made a partial explanation for the Pistons' road record by comparing North Side with the other venues in the league. Each court had its own characteristics. Among other things, the fans at North Side sat almost on top of the players. While the Pistons were used to it, the other teams were not.

Although the court in Boston was very short, most of the others were larger. Schaus said, "We loved it there at North Side High School. We didn't know what we were doing on those big courts."

Brian nosed out Foust by four points in the scoring, 1051-1047 (a 15.9 point per game average). Both beat Schaus' Fort Wayne scoring record of 1028 set the previous year.

As the season ended, Ralph (Boag) Johnson announced his retirement and signed on as head basketball coach at neighboring Columbia City. The Pistons, with their eighth place finish, would pick third and thirteenth in the upcoming NBA college draft.

1952-53

Fred Zollner's patience had to be wearing thin. True to his word, when he and Carl Bennett signed Paul Birch as coach, there would be no panic. Fort Wayne would begin the rebuilding process.

In fact, instead of rocking the boat, Zollner tried to fill it up. Three of the biggest deals in pro history had brought Charlie Share aboard (from Waterloo via Boston), Frankie Brian (from Tri-Cities, where he was scoring leader) and Dike Eddleman (from Milwaukee).

The club had won three games less than two years earlier. That was when Mendenhall was axed when Fort Wayne missed the playoffs for the first time.

Birch shrugged off the 1952-52 campaign as "our sacrifice year."

"We knew it would take some time to build the club back up to be a contender," he said in a post-season interview, "This building would be entirely in my hands. We've come a long way. We'll improve a lot more next year.

"Most of the players had not played anything but fast-break basketball all their lives. They knew little about give-and-go and defense, which I think is so important to a club that's going to be a champion or contender.

"In efforts to get run, run, run out of their systems, we perhaps 'over-emphasized' the deliberate style of play."

Statistics tended to show the gradual improvement. The Z's won 22 and lost 19 after the Christmas break, only two-and-a-half games slower than the 24-19 records of the division leaders, Minneapolis and Syracuse (24-16). New York was 24-17; Rochester, 23-18; Boston 23-19.

But the lazy start still left them eighth in a ten team league, which would mean better draft picks. Fighting over college players had presumably ended when the National Pro Basketball League folded, but a new worry was the AAU teams, particularly the Phillips 66 Oilers and Peoria

Caterpillars. They were threat enough for Commissioner Podoloff to offer them NBA franchises.

Phillips had signed Kansas' Clyde Lovellette, who had led the Jayhawks to the NCAA championship.

Larry Foust's exceptional sophomore year had earned him second-string on the all-NBA team, but had also stymied the development of Share. The all-league team had George Mikan (Minneapolis), Paul Arizin (Philadelphia), Bob Cousy (Boston), Bob Davies (Rochester), with Dolf Schayes (Syracuse) and Easy Ed Macauley tied for the other spot on the first team. Vern Mikkelsen (Minneapolis), Jim Pollard (Minneapolis), Bob Wanzer (Rochester), Andy Phillip (Philadelphia) and Foust were on the second team. It was worth one hundred dollars for Foust.

It was a dandy draft for Fort Wayne. Prime picks were six-foot-seven Don (Monk) Meineke, Dayton's three-year record scorer, and Dazzling Dick Groat, who had shattered all of Duke's scoring records and led all college scoring in 1952 with 831 points.

Groat was also a brilliant baseball player, and his reputed signing bonus (of \$75,000) with Branch Rickey of the Pittsburgh Pirates apparently frightened other clubs away. He was still available for Birch and Bennett when their thirteenth draft choice came up. Bennett had been outmaneuvered by Boston's Red Auerbach in Bill Sharman's baseball-basketball dilemma before, so he was willing to take the chance with Groat.

Others drafted were: Bob Clifton (Iowa); Bill Carlson (Fordham); Hal Cerra (Duke); Leo Corkery (St. Bonaventure); Lee Terrill (North Carolina) and Jim Ranstead (Stanford).

Fort Wayne outbid two AAU offers and Meineke apparently got his \$5000 signing bonus after Louisville coach John Drommer called him, "the best-looking center to come down the pike since Alex Groza." Groat stepped from Duke's campus directly to starting shortstop for the Pirates. Once the baseball season ended, arrangements were being made for Groat to commute from Duke to Fort Wayne for as many games as he could work into his classroom schedule.

In other basketball news, Doxie Moore was named supervisor of the NBA officials. Former Piston Buddy Jeannette signed on as coach of Georgetown University. Most importantly for Fort Wayne, the NBA decided its third annual All-Star game would be played in the spanking new Allen County War Memorial Coliseum on January 13, 1953. The Z's had outbid Minneapolis and Milwaukee for the honor.

Fort Wayne's All-Star Choices



~ANDY IS A
"TAKE CHARGE"
TYPE OF PLAYER!

SEE THESE
ZOLLNER PISTON
STARS PERFORM
WITH THE N.B.A.'S
"BEST" IN TUESDAY'S
ALL-STAR ENCOUNTER
AT THE COLISEUM...
...THEY REPRESENT THE
WESTERN DIVISION

ANDY
Phillip



LARRY
Foust



...FOR THE
3RD ANNUAL
NATIONAL
BASKETBALL
ASSOCIATION'S
ALL-STAR
CLASSIC
!!

~RUGGED REBOUNDER
AND POTENT PISTON
SCORER!

The league, stabilized by the same ten returning teams, drew up a 70-game schedule with 33 home dates and two games thrown in the double-header pool. Practice was to start September 22. Ticket prices at the Coliseum remained at the old rate: \$1.75, \$1.50 and \$1.25, still the best bargain in the NBA.

Bill Closs announced his retirement on September 13, to go into the sporting goods business in California. Dike Eddleman was pondering an offer from the Chicago Cardinals of the National Football League to become their punter.

With the prospect of expanding activities in the new Coliseum, Phil Olofson joined Carl Bennett and Rodger Nelson in the publicity promotion department of the Pistons. He was a young but experienced sportswriter at the *News-Sentinel*.

Holiday on Ice, The Biggest Show with King Cole, Sarah Vaughan, Stan Kenton and Gene Autry had already been booked as early attractions at the Coliseum.

The idea of an outdoor summer ice show was a novelty. Bennett approached Fred Zollner one day while he was watching batting practice to broach the subject. Fred stood tapping his foot with a bat while Bennett talked. He was a little skeptical, but Bennett was sure it would work. Finally he said, "Well go ahead, but if it loses money, I'll have to break this bat over your head."

Holiday on Ice turned out to be the biggest money maker they had, with every booking but one sold out. Bob Hope was booked twice, and also turned a large profit for the organization. It was useful, too, for neither of the teams made money.

The first basketball match in the new arena would be a double-header sending Minneapolis against Milwaukee, and the Pistons against Indianapolis on October 19. A week later, the Harlem Globetrotters would be one-half of a double bill, with the Z's meeting Rochester in the other half.

Birch drilled a veteran team of Foust, Schaus, Kerris, Share, Brian, Kiley, Fendley, Eddleman, and the rookie, Meineke. Two other college draftees, Ted Tomlin, a Navy veteran, and Tom Bowman of Tulane, were trying to make the club.

Schaus missed all ten exhibition games with early season back problems, which seemed to be an annual problem. He was used sparingly in the league opener at Rochester.

The back problems stemmed from a pre-season exhibition game some time before. At Fort Campbell in Kentucky, Fred had a collision

with George Mikan, who connected with the side of Schaus' thigh. It twisted his back. He was flown back to hospital in Fort Wayne and surgery was considered, but he seemed to recover. The back problems which began then still bother him. The effect in Fort Wayne was to relegate him to back-up.

The Zollners won five of the pre-season games. In their home opener they lost to Milwaukee 71-67 after the Lakers had thumped Indianapolis 101-72. The first basketball game at the building drew 4821 fans. George Yardley came the following season, so he and the Coliseum were new together. Asked later how he felt about playing there, he said, "There was nothing compared to it. The lighting was excellent."

Dazzling Dick Groat made his debut at the same time, scoring nine points. After Groat had led Pittsburgh in hitting during the baseball season with .285, Branch Rickey had nixed the idea of his playing basketball during the winter season. He relented because Groat's military call had a January deadline on it. It appeared that Groat would be available for about twenty of the Pistons' games.

What did the other players think about Groat flying in for a game or two and then leaving again? "That guy could do a lot of things," said Dike Eddleman, "I was amazed that he could come in on weekends and play basketball with us. He added a lot, he was so quick."

Two college All-Star games were scheduled in Chicago and New York against the pro champion Lakers. Groat and Meineke both played for the Stars. Groat scored 15, Meineke 13 as Minneapolis won 80-69. Meineke was chosen most valuable player in both games.

Trying for an extra edge, the Pistons decided to get more rest by flying to their NBA opener against the Royals. This was unusual for Fred Zollner, who was an apprehensive flyer, but anything was worth trying if it meant winning.

It did not work. Rochester won 75-62.

The previous week, Fort Wayne had had its first Coliseum win over the Royals 74-70. It was an exhibition, coupled with an appearance by the Globetrotters which attracted 9419, a new high for a Fort Wayne basketball audience. It was so successful that the Piston management brought the Globetrotters right back five nights later and packed in 8723 more patrons.

Fort Wayne shored up its ranks by signing veteran Ray Corley and coaxing Boag Johnson out of retirement for a couple of games.

Smarting from the twelve-point loss at Rochester, the Pistons came back on a charter flight for their home opener against Minneapolis.

They stumbled again 81-69, despite Foust's 19 points and 20 rebounds. The crowd for opening night was 5683, but only 3300 came out four nights later as Rochester beat the Z's 84-64.

Groat was flown in for the next game and his 11 points helped spark the Pistons to their first win, 74-71. The Olympians turned the tables 78-63 in Indy two nights later, leaving the record at 1-4.

Groat made his most profound impression on November 16, when he poured in 25 points, inspiring the Pistons to a 112-83 win over the New York Knicks. Four nights later they fell back into the western division basement in an 89-81 loss to Minneapolis. Mikkelsen got 31 points and Mikan 32.

Late in November, after the Z's won only three of their first ten games, Zollner reached for his checkbook and bought the contract of All-Star Andy Phillip from the financially struggling Philadelphia Warriors. Phillip had turned out to be the best of the famous Illinois Whiz Kids. He was in his sixth year as a pro and had led the league in assists the last two years.

Mel Hutchins later described Phillip as "a court general. He'd rather pass than shoot."

Ray Corley was released and waivers were asked on Jack Kiley.

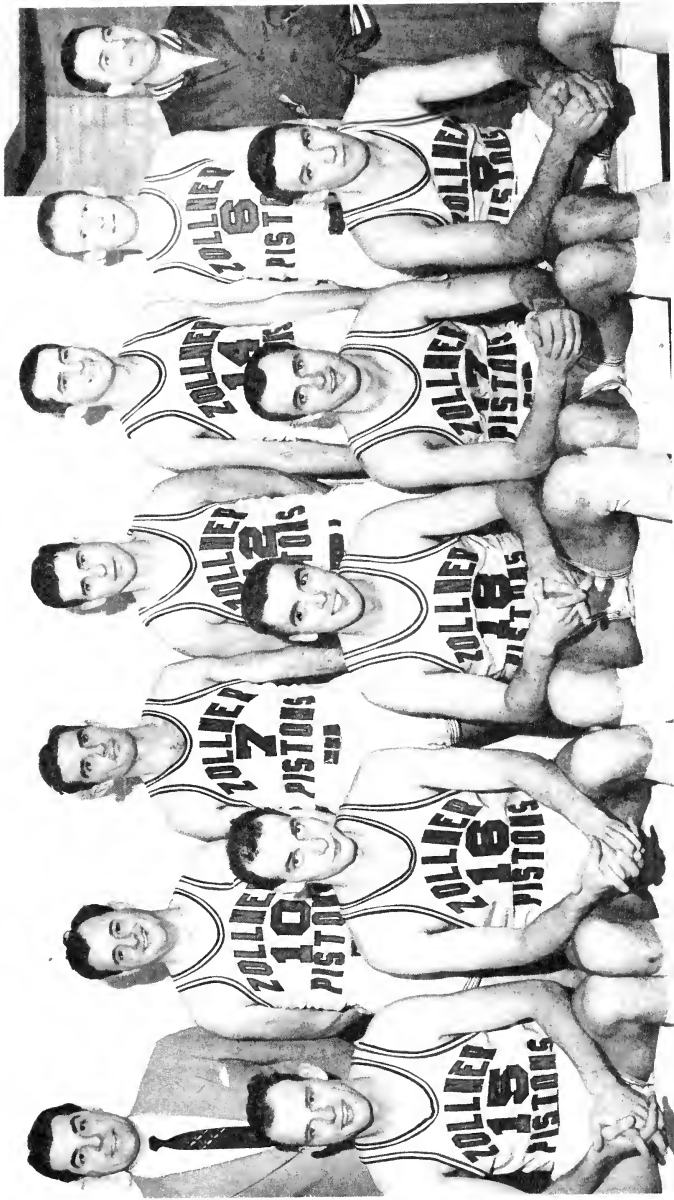
Continuing to make headline news and basketball history, Fred Zollner made another memorable purchase, this time in the equipment line. The 'Buying Z' bought a 'Flying Z'. Zollner announced the purchase of a DC-3 to transport his pro sports teams on their arduous schedules. The plane was the first in sports history to be used for transporting an entire team to games in various cities. In the Zollner fashion, press conferences were rare. The formal announcement came from the Pistons plant:

"You can call them the Flying Z's now. In a revolutionary move in the athletic world, the Zollner Pistons have announced the purchase of a 21-passenger airship for transporting the Zollner athletic teams around the country.

"The Douglas DC-3 has been purchased from United Airlines and until this week was one of its regular commercial passenger-carrying craft.

"Fred Zollner, president of the company, stated the purchase of the Zollner DC-3 plane will serve the dual purpose of bringing our organization closer to our manufacturing customers and also will provide fast and dependable transportation for our athletic teams.

"The ex-United Mainliner gets into duty today (Dec. 5) when it takes off from Baer Field at 1 p.m. It takes off with the Zollner basketball squad and their date with the Indianapolis Olympians at Butler Fieldhouse



Zollner Pistons, 1952-53. Standing L to R: coach Paul Birch, Fred Scolari, Frank Brian, Dike Eddleman, Andy Phillip, Jake Fendley, trainer Stan Kenworthy. Seated L to R: Don Boven, Larry Foust, Charlie Share, Don Meineke, Fred Schaus.

tonight. After the game tonight the team will leave directly for Baltimore, Md., and their Saturday night date with the Bullets.

"And when the Baltimore game is completed the team will hustle to the airport and hop the plane which will return them to Fort Wayne early Sunday morning in plenty of good sleeping time for their Coliseum date Sunday night against the New York Knickerbockers.

"The plane is equipped with two fourteen-cylinder Pratt and Whitney engines of the latest type.

"It marks the first time in sports history that a plane has been purchased for the transportation of entire teams to the scenes of their many battles.

"Many major league baseball and football owners have private planes for their personal use, but they have not been used for transporting complete teams. Permitting the Pistons to fly this year has been a sharp reversal of policy for Zollner teams of the past. Only in isolated instances were players (and never a full team) allowed to use air travel as a mode of transportation.

"Mr. Zollner accompanied the team on several charter flights this year and became completely sold on the airplane-type travel and to assure speed, safety and the most rest for his ball players, decided to buy a company plane which they could use.

"This became practically a necessity because of the frequent unavailability of 21-passenger charter equipment on various trips. So the Piston owner invoke a deviation of the old sports axiom, 'if you can't beat 'em, buy 'em'."

Perhaps this more than anything else shows Fred Zollner's business sense in action. Despite his own feelings about flying, he recognized what the future held and acted early. His ability to anticipate trends and needs stood him in good stead in both business and sports.

The plane had a practical effect for the players. They were used to playing somewhere one night, taking an overnight train back to Fort Wayne and playing a home game the next day. For tall basketball players, the train's constricted berths were not entirely suitable. Bigger players were known to sit up all night instead of trying to fold themselves into the bed. This problem, combined with occasional difficulties when the weather prevented the train for getting in on time, the players were often forced to play when they were tired.

The plane enabled the team to return home late after a game, sleep in their own beds and be ready for action the following day. Every player asked about the *Flying Z* had an enthusiastic response.

George Yardley described the inside. There was a galley up front, with a card table and four seats beside it. A little further back, there were another pair of tables, each with four seats. Then there was a partition which led into Fred Zollner's part of the plane. In the back were lounge seats and a sofa.

Yardley found there was a little space behind Fred's chair. "He let me sleep there on the floor, but I never did sit on the sofa."

The card tables were well used. Frank Brian told how he had learned from Murray Mendenhall during his days in Anderson. "Mendenhall taught all his players how to play bridge. The eleven years I played, all the teams played bridge." He said that none of them gambled, however. You might play for matches, but that was all.

The year's disappointing start put the Pistons behind the eight ball in the western division. However, the steadying influence of Phillip and more appearances by Groat helped the team to do a little flying of its own.

In December they strung together six wins, their longest streak since the 1947-48 season. One of the stunners was a 95-64 blowout of Philadelphia before 14,000 fans in the first half of a double-header in Madison Square Garden. Unfortunately, they were humiliated 89-66 by Boston in front of the regular season's biggest home crowd of 8055.

The Z's came to the All-Star break climbing over the .500 mark at 18-17, which left them eight games back of the Lakers and six back of the Royals, but nonetheless comfortably safe in third place ahead of Indianapolis and Milwaukee.

Hosting the third annual NBA All-Star game became the greatest big-league event in Fort Wayne sports history.

The 1953 All-Star Game

Fort Wayne, usually a whistle stop, became Grand Central for pro basketball when it threw out its welcome mat for the All-Star game. The two-day caucus of basketball's brass included a 4 a.m. takeoff by Zollner in his "Flying Z" to pick up sports writers and broadcasters in Boston, New York and Rochester, then bring them to Fort Wayne. Twenty top sportswriters arrived.

George Craig took the oath of office as governor of Indiana at noon Monday in ceremonies in Indianapolis. One of his first proclamations named "Indiana Basketball Week" in honor of Fort Wayne hosting the NBA. The league's Board of Governors held a special meeting Monday night at the Van Orman hotel.

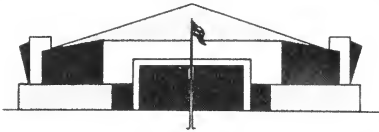
3rd Annual

NATIONAL BASKETBALL ASSOCIATION



All-Star Game

January 15, 1953



Memorial

354

Brand NEW! Piston!



TOP SCORER FOR
UNIV. OF DAYTON LAST
SEASON, LEADING THEM
TO FINAL GAME OF
NATIONAL INVITATIONAL
TOURNEY AT MADISON
SQUARE GARDEN...THEY
FINISHED IN THE
RUNNER-UP SPOT



DON HOLDS THE
ALL-OHIO
SCORING RECORD

YES CALL ME
'SHORTY'.



AT 6'-7", DON
IS ONLY THE 3RD
TALLEST MEMBER
OF THE PISTON
SQUAD

Don Meineke

...THE TOP
DRAFT CHOICE
OF THE
ZOLLNER
PISTONS !!

BOB
FARBER

A civic luncheon on the playing floor with the twenty all-stars, the Board and the other Zollner players attracted 350 fans who watched Mayor Harry Baals give Commissioner Maurice Podoloff the key to the city.

Foust and Phillip were selected to the West All-Star team. They were joined by Mel Hutchins, Milwaukee; Vern Mikkelsen, George Mikan and Slater Martin, Minneapolis; Bobby Wanzer, Bob Davies and Arnie Risen, Rochester; and Leo Barnhorst, Indianapolis. The coach was John Kundla of Minneapolis.

The East was coached by New York's Joe Lapchick. The players were Harry Gallatin and Carl Braun, New York; Dolph Schayes, Paul Seymour, Syracuse; Ed Macauley, Bill Sharman and Bob Cousy, Boston; Don Barksdale and Fred Scolari, Baltimore; and Neil Johnston, Philadelphia. (Billy Gabor of Syracuse replaced an injured Fred Scolari when game-time arrived.)

The East had won the previous two All-Star games, which had taken place in Boston.

The game had tremendous coverage from the media. A total of 73 newspaper and radio writers covered the game in person, with fourteen radio stations and seven cameras for newsreels, television and the movies. It was the first step for the NBA in the new medium, as the league signed its first television contract with Dumont during the next season.

The game, the production, the attention and the show put a new glow on pro basketball's outlook. At the NBA governors' meeting, some franchises had needed propping up. There were discussions of Philadelphia merging with Baltimore and Indianapolis with Milwaukee. Doxie Moore resigned as supervisor of officials.

Indianapolis was promised some financial aid and more double-headers to stay in business, and the ten teams were ready to go on for the season.

On game night, fans started pouring in at six for the eight o'clock pregame festivities, and an 8:30 tipoff. The Coliseum was jam-packed with 10,322 fans. It was the largest crowd to attend an All-Star game to that point.

They were treated to a superb basketball game. The West won 79-75. George Mikan was the most valuable player with 22 points. Fort Wayne's Andy Phillip had nine points and eight assists, and gained 16 points in the MVP voting, next to Mikan's 23. Bob Davies had a great spurt of eight points in the last quarter to help the West win.

The game gave Fort Wayne headlines from coast to coast.

Ike Gellis wrote in the *New York Post*: "There may be as good an all-star game in the future, but the third one staged here last night will never be surpassed. For a city of only 135,000, Fort Wayne gave the pro game a big time touch. It was Phillip's feeding of his Western mates that made the difference."

In the *Rochester Times-Union*, Matt Jackson said: "It was a Hollywood production, big league from start to finish. Anyone who inherits next year's All-Star contest will find it like singing after Caruso to match the efforts of the hard-working Zollner crew. Not a trick was missed in presenting the world's greatest basketball stars to the record turnout.

"It was the greatest shot in the arm professional basket-ball has had since the inception of the sport. Every player lived up to all the glowing advance reports. It was a great show, performed by outstanding artists and staged in a perfect setting by the perfect host, Fred Zollner. It did a lot for the cause of pro basketball."

In the hometown *Journal-Gazette*, Carl Weigman boasted: "Ned Irish, who runs the biggest basketball emporium in the league, Madison Square Garden in New York, said that he'd hoped to have the classic in New York next year, but after seeing this promotion, perhaps he'd better wait a few years."

To make it even more official, the *Journal-Gazette* printed an editorial which summarized the whole event. It offered an opinion about the future and congratulations to the organizers: "[Fort Wayne] can expect to see other events of similar quality in the future, for the reputation of this city as a sports center has gone up many degrees this week.

"Of course, it would not have been possible to hold this much-sought-after All-Star event here except for the Memorial Coliseum with its great seating capacity and its fine facilities. The Coliseum has become an outstanding center of community events since its dedication. It has contributed much to the reputation of Fort Wayne throughout the country.

"Neither would holding the All-Star game here have been possible but for the all-out efforts of Fred Zollner through the years to give Fort Wayne the best in sports. Mr. Zollner has been a pioneer in many fields and his efforts have been appreciated by the sports lover. ...Fred Zollner and his organization deserve a big hand."²³

²³ *Journal Gazette*, January 15, 1953.

As the All-Star dust was settling, rumors were rife that Zollner was once again ready to open his checkbook. Roger Barry, of the *Boston Patriot-Ledger*, said: "There isn't any doubt but that Fred Zollner will go

All-Star Game Box Score

East	MINS	FGA	FGM	FTA	FTM	REB	AST	FLS	PTS
Barksdale	11	1	0	3	1	3	2	0	1
Braun	21	4	1	1	1	3	2	2	3
Cousy	36	11	4	7	7	5	3	1	15
Gabor	14	3	2	2	1	3	2	1	5
Gallatin	19	4	1	2	1	3	2	1	3
Johnston	27	13	5	2	1	12	0	2	11
Macauley	35	12	5	8	8	7	3	2	18
Schayes	26	7	2	4	4	13	3	3	8
Seymour	25	3	0	1	0	5	2	1	0
Sharman	26	8	5	1	1	4	0	2	11
TOTALS	240	66	25	31	25	66	19	15	75

West	MINS	FGA	FGM	FTA	FTM	REB	AST	FLS	PTS
Barnhorst	13	2	1	1	0	2	1	2	2
Davies	17	7	3	6	3	3	2	2	9
Foust	18	7	5	0	0	6	0	4	10
Hutchins	30	8	1	1	0	6	5	2	2
Martin	28	10	2	1	1	2	1	2	5
Mikan	40	26	9	4	4	16	2	2	22
Mikkelson	19	13	3	0	0	6	3	3	6
Phillip	36	9	4	1	1	6	8	2	9
Risen	19	7	2	3	1	9	2	3	5
Wanzer	22	7	4	1	1	2	2	1	9
TOTALS	240	97	33	18	11	62	26	23	79

(from *The Journal-Gazette*, January 14, 1953)

to any length to give the league's smallest city a championship. He fed Les Harrison of Rochester offers of \$50,000 for Davies and Wanzer, and a blank check to Boston for Cousy, and was told, 'You can't have him for Dick Groat *and* your plane.'"

The Pistons, with their new respectability, perked up and won thirteen of their next twenty-two games to sail to a 31-26 record, but they had started too far back to catch the high-flying Lakers and Royals. Groat left for the service in early February, and Buckshot O'Brien was reactivated to fill out the squad.

The Z's added more all-star talent when they beat the trading deadline on February 17 by mere hours, dealing Jack Kerris, O'Brien and cash to Baltimore for Fred Scolari and Don Boven.

Overriding some fan skepticism because of Birch's public relations shortcomings, Fred Zollner more or less said, "A deal's a deal," in his typical style. He rehired Birch when the Pistons were assured of finishing the season at a better than .500 pace.

"When Paul accepted the position of coach," Zollner explained, "He realized the intense competition in the National Basketball Association, particularly in the Western division. He asked for two seasons to bring the team above the .500 percentage mark. This has been accomplished.

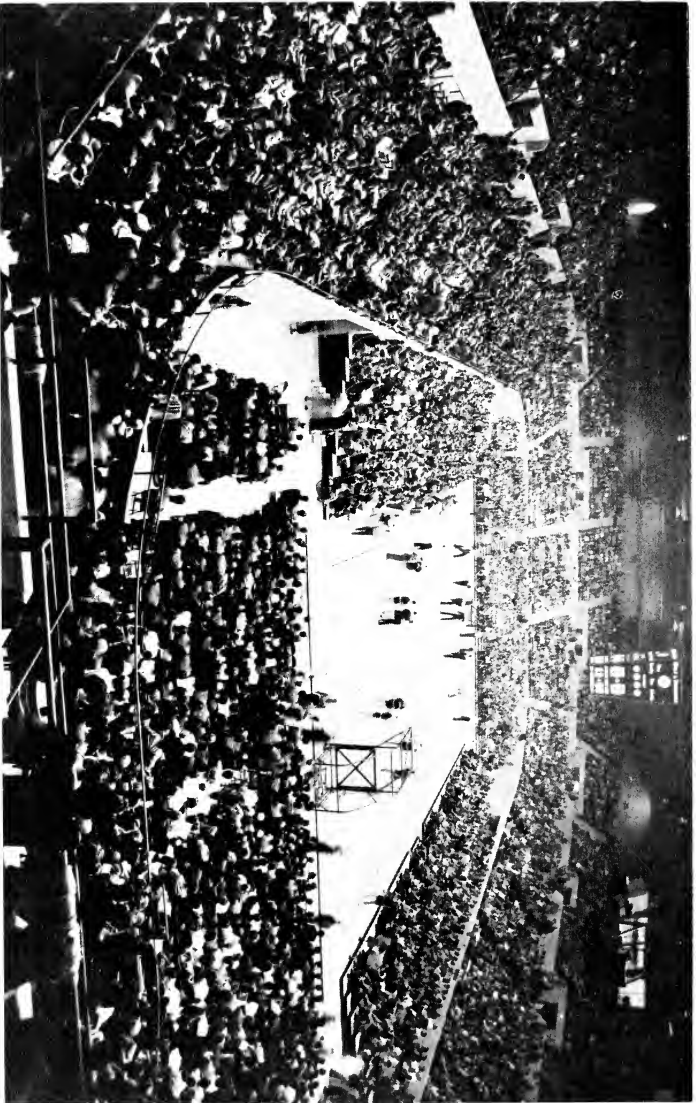
"He has produced a team that cannot — and will not — be counted out of any ball game. We are now known throughout the circuit as one of the 'Big Six' and one Eastern paper has given us the compliment of the 'always trying Zollners.'

"We have become an outstanding road attraction and our road victory record this year is the most impressive in our NBA history."

The team's final standing was 36-33. Included were 25 home wins, eight road wins and three victories on neutral courts. Losing nine of ten to Minneapolis and seven of ten to Rochester left Fort Wayne ten and a half games back of the Lakers and six and a half behind Rochester. That sent the Pistons into the playoffs in a best two-of-three series against the Royals. Minneapolis took on Indianapolis.

The Piston-Rochester series was perhaps wilder than any other in recent years. The Z's won the first game, 84-77, in a huge upset at Rochester, and then lost their edge when Rochester returned the compliment 83-71 in Fort Wayne. The Pistons had thought they would use their home-town advantage to win.

Buoyed by a flood of more than a hundred fan telegrams and the momentum of winning their last three games in Rochester, the Pistons



The new Allen County War Memorial Coliseum is filled to the rafters for a Zollner-Piston basketball game. 1953.

achieved the impossible dream by beating the Royals 67-65 to move into the semifinals against the Lakers.

Before that last game, six-foot Jake Fendley told Birch the baskets were too low because he could dunk a shot. Dunking was unusual during the games in those days, although Charlie Share remembers the players would dunk shots during warm-up to excite the fans.

The Pistons asked referees Jocko Collins and Arnie Heft for a measurement, and found one basket was three inches short of the ten-foot level and the other, two inches shy. The difference of even two or three inches could throw off expert players who were used to gauging their throws to the standard of ten feet.

The Pistons protested the game before the start; Rochester counter-protested; frantic calls were made to Commissioner Podoloff. The game was delayed twenty minutes and the arguing continued.

Dike Eddleman suggests that someone in Rochester had made the adjustments purposely, simply to cause a fuss. As for Podoloff's vacillating on this occasion, Dike remarked, "I don't think he made a lot of decisions."

At the start of the second half, there was another twenty minute delay. To Podoloff's relief, the game ended with a last-second basket by Fort Wayne's Frank Brian. Several hundred fans were at the airport to meet the Pistons when the *Flying Z* touched down at 3 a.m.

It was the only time that Rochester had lost four straight at home to any team. It also had to be one of Fred Zollner's most exhilarating wins.

Then it was on to Minneapolis for the best three-of-five semifinal series. In the first two games, the Lakers whipped the emotionally drained Pistons 83-73 and 82-75. The Pistons had now been beaten in eleven of the past twelve games by the defending champs. They returned to Fort Wayne and tiptoed to the edge of becoming Destiny's Darlings by staying alive 98-95 and 85-82.

At least a hundred cars formed a headlit motorcade to Baer Field from the Coliseum for the Z's return for the decisive fifth game in Minneapolis. Inevitably, the cream came to the top, and the best team in basketball, the Lakers, delivered a first quarter knockout punch 23-9. The Pistons could not recover and the final score was 74-58. The Lakers then went on to defend their championship against New York, bouncing the Knicks in five games 4-1.

Larry Foust had a tremendous playoff series, averaging better than 19 points in the eight games, allowing his season total to reach 1111 points. He was the first Piston to reach more than 1100 points in a season.

Looking back, Andy Phillip said, "Larry was the second or third best big man at the time. He was a good scorer, but not a guy who wanted the ball all the time. He got his share of rebounds and points." He concluded by suggesting that he has always thought Foust deserved more recognition than he has had.

Scolari continued the high-scoring pace he had set in Baltimore and his total for both Pistons' and Bullets' games gave him 937. Dick Groat's 26-game average of 11.9 points made him third best in the department.

It was a redemptive finish for an inspirational season, and there seemed to be a lot of blue sky on the horizon as the Zollners quickly drafted Columbia's great Jack Molinas and anticipated the signing of Stanford's sensational George Yardley. Yardley's Los Alamitos Naval Air Station team had recently beat Dick Groat's Fort Belvoir team for the service championship.

Don Meineke was the choice as NBA Rookie of the Year. Phillip was selected to the second All-Star team.

The first team consisted of George Mikan, Minneapolis; Neil Johnston, Philadelphia; Ed Macauley, Boston; Bob Cousy, Boston; Dolph Schayes, Syracuse. On the second team were Phillip; Bob Davies; Bob Wanzer, Rochester; Bill Sharman, Boston; Vern Mikkelsen, Minneapolis.

Unlike the fastball players, the basketball team members did not have positions in the piston plant to fall back on during the off-season. Some may have chosen to rest during that time, but many had other jobs. Charlie Share and Jack Kerris, for instance, were on the clean-up squad at Zollner Stadium. Andy Phillip spent one summer as a sales rep for a local beer distributor, once again proving that everyone in Fort Wayne knew the Pistons. Having had early ambitions to play baseball, he was part of the Cardinals organization, playing AAA ball in Winston-Salem and elsewhere.

1953-54

After the first year in the Allen County Memorial Coliseum, excitement and optimism were at an all-time high for the Pistons getting back into the championship arena.

The way the Pistons had beaten the Royals in the playoffs led the Fort Wayne faithful to expect great things in the new season. Although the Lakers had beaten the Knicks in the finals, Pistons' fans remembered how their team had controlled New York during the regular season.

In the first season, the Pistons had become the Coliseum's best tenant. At the end of the basketball season, they had promoted seventeen days of roller derby, boxing and wrestling, featuring such big names as Chuck Davey and Vern Gagne. As a warmup for the 1953-54 season, they attracted more than 8000 outdoor fans to Zollner Stadium for a Harlem Globetrotter—College All-Star basketball exhibition.

The high hopes escalated when Fred Zollner bought the contract of Mel Hutchins from the financially strapped Milwaukee Hawks in August. It was believed to be the biggest player purchase in pro history to that time. He was later described by George Yardley as “the best defensive player in the league.”

Ben Kerner needed the cash, so he asked Fred Zollner which players he wanted. Fred said he wanted Mel Hutchins. “You can’t have him,” Kerner replied.

Fred shrugged. Hutchins was the only one he wanted. The deal went through, for an amount that is still not known. Kerner had promised Hutchins part of the price, but he did not receive it.

Mel later said, “What they needed was someone to homogenize the team — rebound, give the ball up, play tough defence, someone to do that. That’s what Fred got me for.” After he arrived in Fort Wayne, Fred and Carl Bennett had a meeting with Hutchins to explain his new place on the team. “Pull the team together and don’t worry about the statistics.”

Because his first years in the NBA were with the Hawks, an expansion team, Hutchins said he played 47 minutes of every 48 minute game and was learning all the time. He had even grown an inch after graduation from college (to six foot six)! He was glad to have had the chance to hone his skills. He now looked forward to playing with the Pistons, where “everything went first class.”

Hutchins thought that Bennett was behind his move from Milwaukee to Fort Wayne. “He was the instigator in my trade, I think.” His opinion of Bennett was high. “A first class manager, he did more than people knew. He had class. He was real good at it.”

Carl Bennett had already lured George Yardley from the AAU and service basketball. Yardley had seemed to be indifferent to pro ball, rejecting the Pistons' initial \$6000 offer. When the bidding went to \$9500, he succumbed.

Yardley had broken Hank Luisetti's long-held scoring record at Stanford and played on a national champion AAU team, Stewart Chevrolet. He missed the 1952 Olympics because of a broken hand, but had a spectacular career with the Los Alamitos Naval Air Station team while in the military. He was, perhaps, the most talked-of newcomer in the league.

He later said that dallying while the price went up may not have been as calculated as it seemed. In fact, he wanted to play at Fort Wayne, but he hated training camp. He spent a little extra time in California, playing volleyball on the beach, and by the time he was ready to head east he was earning some extra money.

With the Z's number-one draft pick, All-American Jack Molinas, Don Meineke, and veterans Fred Schaus, Larry Foust and Charlie Share, the result was the prospect of the Pistons having the best in-depth front line in the business. Ken Murray was returning from the service. Others at the late-September first practice call were Frank Brian, Fred Scolari, Andy Phillip, Dike Eddleman, Don Boven and, another draft pick, Jim Bredar from Illinois.

Coach Paul Birch, armed with a new two-year contract, may have had the toughest assignment of all in training camp. Which stars of the talent-loaded squad would he be forced to cut?

The outlook for the NBA should have been brighter. Competition from the AAU had dwindled. Many bright college stars were coming into the league. Minneapolis had signed Clyde Lovellette away from the Phillips Oilers; seven-foot Walt Dukes had left the Globetrotters to join New York's Knicks; the Indianapolis franchise folded and players were distributed to other clubs around the league.

This left the league with an unwieldy mix of nine teams. Five were in the east: New York, Boston, Syracuse, Philadelphia and Baltimore. The four in the west were Minneapolis, Rochester, Fort Wayne and Milwaukee.

Basketball's biggest problem was the management of the game itself, despite the waiting audience in the arenas. One problem was the slowness of constructive rules changes.

Carl Bennett had recommended the widening of the foul lane to fifteen feet in 1948, in Basketball Association of America days. This was rejected as being formulated against George Mikan (which it was). The owners viewed Mikan as "Mr. Basketball" and would not consider a rule directed against him. Only in 1951 was the foul lane widened to twelve feet. Mikan himself later admitted the lane widening was the best thing that had happened to the game.

Not since the famous 1950 game when Fort Wayne beat Minneapolis 19-18, the catalyst for the 24 second rule, had the rulers of basketball come up with a satisfactory solution to keep games from becoming yawners or slugfests. The BAA founders were basically hockey promoters, encouraging several good fights to stimulate the turnstiles, but there did not seem to be a happy blend for basket-brawl and basketball.

Most players found they liked things under the new rules. The new foul lane gave more people a chance and the 24-second clock speeded the game up.

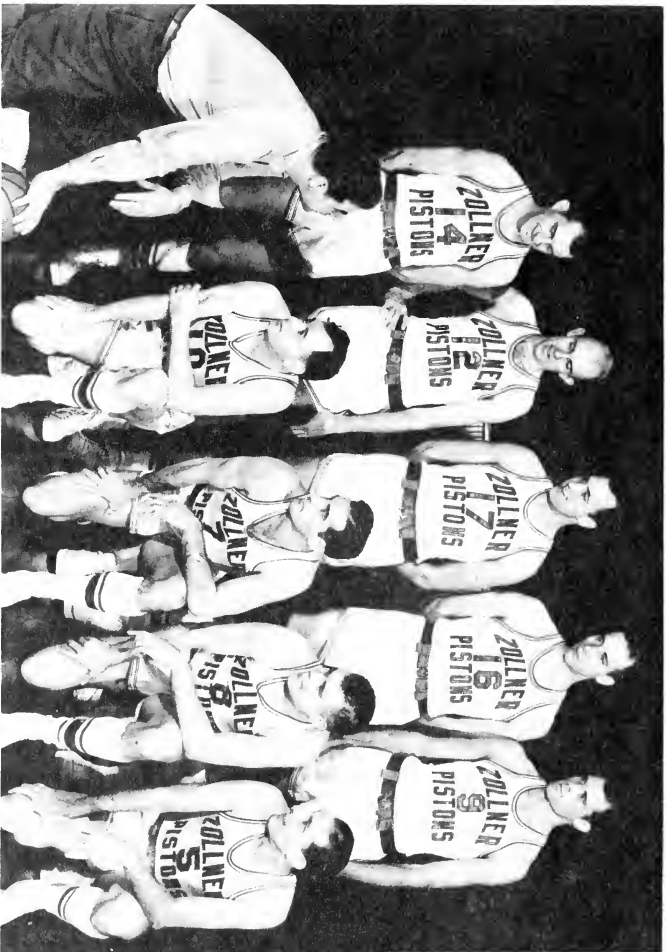
Not everyone agreed. Andy Phillip had an interesting take on the faster game. "It gave more opportunity to manoeuver, and opened up the defense. It increased fan interest, but it turned it into a YMCA game, everything was run-and-shoot, run-and-shoot. Nobody can see what's going on."

In those early days, the rules changed in response to specific situations on the court or in the boardroom. Mel Hutchins remembers that, at the end of his rookie year, commissioner Maurice Podoloff called him in for a meeting. He told Mel that there was going to be a rule change, and he was the reason. In the future, players would not be allowed to touch the ball in the cylinder, tipping in errant shots. Because Mel could jump, he had been able to do this. The rule changed in college as well as pro ball. Whatever he thought about the change at the time, he knows now it was a good idea, given the big men who followed him.

The NBA now had a new opportunity to be major league with its first television contract. On the other hand, officiating was indecisive and inconsistent, with charges of intimidation. The term "bush league" kept popping up.

In a Rochester-Fort Wayne game early in the season, 77 fouls were whistled, 48 against the Royals, 29 against the Pistons. The Pistons won the game 68-65 by scoring only eleven baskets and hitting 46 of 61 free throws. A year earlier, in the Syracuse-Boston playoffs, 107 fouls were called in a game that went into four overtimes. Bob Cousy had scored 50 points, 30 of them at the foul strips.

Officials did not know whether to "let 'em play or call 'em close." Podoloff waffled. Chuck Chuckovits, who worked both NBA and college ball, recalled that the officials were reminded that the players had been All-Americans and the college rulebook would be used. Following this directive, Chuckovits and Jim Enright refereed a game in Fort Wayne with around 80 fouls. The following day, they received a telegram from Maurice Podoloff charging them with using a high-school standard and



Zollner Pistons, 1953-54. Standing L to R: Andy Phillip, George Yardley, Don Meineke, Larry Foust, Mel Hutchins. Kneeling L to R: coach Paul Birch, Fred Scolari, Frank Brian, Ken Murray, Max Zaslofsky.

suggesting they need not be so technical. The following night they called only three fouls, which also displeased the higher-ups. Both Enright and Chuckovits eventually left for the more moderate world of the Big Ten.

Podoloff himself and referee Chuck Solodare needed a police escort to leave Boston Garden following a Celtic-Knick barnburner. Sid Borgia and John Nucatola needed a 15 to 20 man police escort to leave the court in Syracuse when owner Dan Biasone and coach Al Cervi incited the crowd after a Nucatola call against Nats star Dolph Schayes.

When Nucatola recommended thousand dollar fines against Biasone and Cervi, there was no response from Podoloff. Nucatola told a New York Metropolitan Basketball Writers Association luncheon that the integrity of the game depended on its officials. He did not receive any assignments for several weeks and resigned from the NBA.²⁴

In addition to the difficulties of poor leadership and inadequate rules, the NBA compounded its problems with an unwieldy 72-game schedule consisting of 27 home games and an expanded double-header program with which it hoped to lure more patrons.

Fred Zollner had his own expansion agenda. He scheduled five games in Florida at Coral Gables and the new Miami Beach Auditorium, all with east coast teams (Baltimore, New York and Philadelphia).

With the NBA down to nine teams, the Board of Governors had to experiment with a new playoff system. The first round was to be a round robin among the top three teams in each division. They hoped to make the home court advantage somewhat less, but it also eliminated some of the excitement and hence, the gate receipts. Philadelphia's Eddie Gottlieb observed that the teams needed the \$20,000 to \$30,000 playoff money to survive.

Despite the optimism of Fort Wayne fans, the two best teams in the NBA were the 'Mikanized' Lakers and the slicker-than-oil Royals. The question was whether or not the Lakers or Royals were slowing up while Fort Wayne's talent search speeded up. In four years of NBA play, the Pistons had trailed the regular season leaders by eleven or twelve games. In the last season, they had come within eight games of the second-place Royals.

Evidence of the quality of Piston players came when one of the first squad cuts included Dike Eddleman. He was a fan favorite, who had a 12.1 scoring average in four seasons of NBA play and had held the Fort

²⁴ Robert W. Peterson, *Cages to Jump Shots*, p. 177-179. Nucatola eventually returned the NBA 1969.

Wayne scoring record of 48 points in one game. Ironically, it had been won while he played for the Tri-Cities Blackhawks against the Pistons at North Side gym.

He had no warning of the impending cut, but was ready because there was a barrier between him and Birch. "If he didn't like you, he didn't like you," he observed. As a result Dike had not been playing much.

Eddleman retired and went to work for Central Soya, first in Fort Wayne and later in Gibson, Illinois. He served seventeen years in the personnel division before returning to head his alma mater's grant-in-aid program at the University of Illinois.

An upbeat spirit prevailed as the Z's breezed through their pre-season games undefeated, winning three from Baltimore and four from Milwaukee. They were the only unbeaten team in the NBA's exhibition schedule.

When the season started, the Pistons continued their fast footing with home wins over Milwaukee and Boston, extending their winning streak to nine games. It was the most consecutive wins they had had in NBA play. One of their most gratifying early season successes was a 78-62 stunner over Minneapolis as part of a double-header at Milwaukee. The Z's front line held Mikan to three points, his all-time low (and perhaps the Pistons' all-time high).

The squad had sifted down to twelve players in November. Zeke Sinicola returned from service. Molinas was rejected at his draft call for being over the army's six foot six inch limit. By mid-November the Pistons were ahead in the western division with a 5-3 record.

Returning servicemen were given a thirty-day trial period during which teams could adjust their rosters. Sinicola's return allowed the Pistons to extend their mandated player limit to eleven players by December 1 and ten by December 7. In the shuffling, Schaus was farmed out for a few games, eventually returning when Sinicola was released and Murray was placed on standby playing local independent ball.

That left the ten-man roster at Hutchins, Meineke, Yardley, Molinas, Foust, Share, Phillip, Scolari, Brian and Schaus.

Did the constantly changing personnel have a negative effect on the ability to mold a team? Dike Eddleman did not think so. "Most of the guys knew everybody. By the time you get into pro ball, it instinctively happens."

An example of the recrossing paths of players in the NBA were Larry Foust and Charlie Share. They had played as regular opponents in college, then as teammates on the Pistons and later again as opponents in

the pros. In one of their youthful meetings, Charlie recalled, Foust had accidentally "knocked four of my teeth out on the boards."

One of the brightest spots of the young season came on November 19. Ironically it was during a losing effort at Syracuse, where Fort Wayne seldom won.

Early in the third period, the Pistons trailed 40-20. Yardley sprang off the bench and the team rallied around his ten-point third quarter. Then rookie Molinas poured in twenty points in the third quarter and the Nats ended by barely nosing out the Zollners 79-76. It was an historic period high score for any Fort Wayne player.

One thing that Fort Wayne could not control was Minneapolis. The Lakers hung up a ten-game winning streak and started distancing themselves from Fort Wayne and Rochester. Through the first twenty games, the Pistons' 12-8 was third best, behind Minneapolis (14-4) and New York (13-5).

Fort Wayne remained pro basketball's best bargain. Fan support was growing and it was little wonder when a December 13 double-header at Memorial Coliseum packed in a crowd of 9306. It featured the four best teams in the NBA, Minneapolis against Rochester and Fort Wayne against New York. Ticket prices were still \$1.50, \$1.25 and \$1.00. Rochester moved into second place that night when the Royals snapped Minneapolis' winning streak and the Pistons lost a 69-68 sizzler to the Knicks.

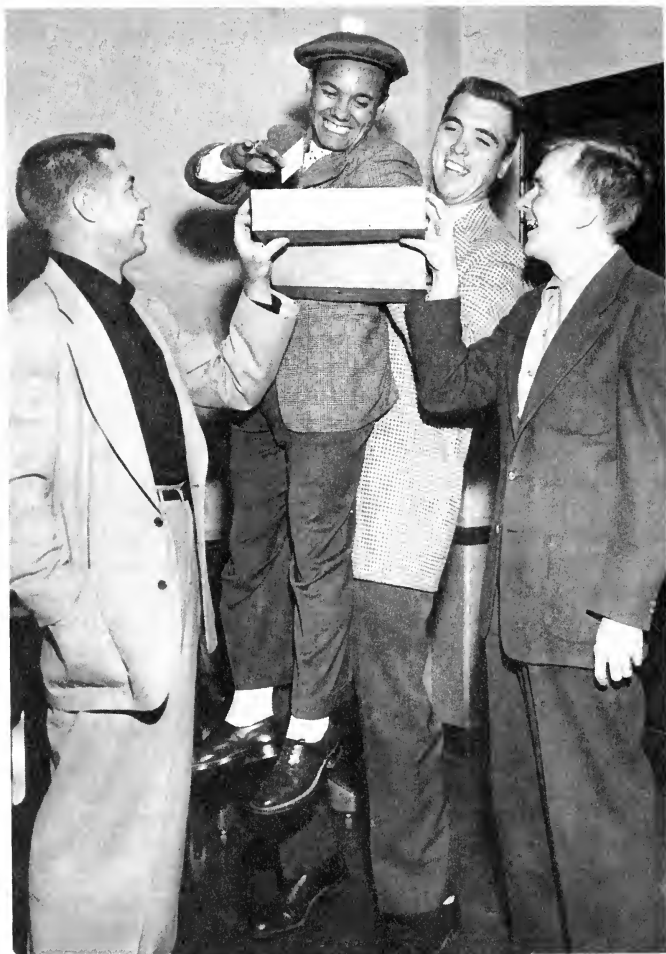
Foust was proving himself one of the league's best big men, leading the team in scoring and rebounds. On December 6, he missed tying the Coliseum's scoring record by one, getting 33 against Syracuse.

Foust's excellent play and Fort Wayne's win record allowed the Pistons to unload Charlie Share gracefully, thus ending a frustrating three years for both parties. Playing in Foust's shadow, Share never had the opportunity to develop into the star he had been projected to be when he came out of Bowling Green University.

He was a big man and consequently not as quick as some of the other players. "Big men then didn't move as well as they do today," Dike Eddleman said, "George Mikan himself would have had the same difficulty. But they would learn to do it differently."

The other side of the coin was that big men had the advantage in the small courts, especially before the foul line was altered to twelve feet. Share said he had difficulty himself with the leading big man, George Mikan.

"Every time he knocked me down," Charlie remembered, "He got two free throws. I had trouble understanding it."



A Pistons public relations event: Bill Johnston, Neil Barille, Charlie Share, Rodger Nelson.

Mel Hutchins also saw this side of Mikan. "He wasn't too much fun," he began.

Mel found he could face Mikan and block his shot because he could jump so high. When Mikan moved in closer, he used his little half-hook, but Mel found he could block that, too. "Hey, rookie," Mikan said, "Block the jump shot, but stay away from the hook."

Naturally, Mel did not listen, but decided to block the hook shots anyway. The next time he tried, Big George went up for the shot, and as Mel says, "He took us all up — himself, the ball and me, too. I landed in the third row of the bleachers and they called a foul against me."

Mel laughs about it now and says, "Later we got to know one another better, and he was more fun."

Smaller, quicker players later made a difference. Charlie Share thinks that Bill Russell was the one who changed things. "When Russell came into the league, his jumping ability made others move away from the hoop. You had to shoot from outside." Speed became essential.

In the bizarre dealings which led to Share donning a Pistons uniform, Fred Zollner had bought his contract from Waterloo of the National Basketball League, traded the player rights of Bill Sharman and sweetened the pot to Boston because Sharman was considering a baseball career. The Waterloo contract was voided by the NBA and Share sat out half a season before he became eligible in 1951-52. He became the Pistons' highest-priced commodity before he had played a game.

Share had a 3.9 scoring average in 1951-52 and 5.6 in 1952-53. When he was traded to Milwaukee there was relief on both sides. Share wound up with a ten-year NBA career and had a championship ring as captain of the 1957-58 Hawks in St. Louis (where they moved from Milwaukee). He later did public relations work for the team before going into the corrugated box business.

Share was traded for veteran Max Zaslofsky, the third highest scorer in NBA history behind George Mikan and Joe Fulks.

Shortly after the Share deal, Fred Schaus was sold to New York and Ken Murray returned to the active roster. Schaus played a year with the Knicks and then went into collegiate coaching at his alma mater, West Virginia.

The Schaus-for-cash deal was a unusual experience for Zollner. Rarely, if ever, had he outright sold a player's contract for cash. He was a buyer, not a seller, in his quest for championships.

Molinas was playing well enough that, in early January, he was selected to play in the NBA's fourth All-Star game in Madison Square Garden. The talent-laden Pistons also landed Mel Hutchins and Larry Foust on the west team and there was some grumbling that Andy Phillip had been excluded. Phillip had been hailed as the runner-up most valuable player in the 1953 All-Star game.

Phillip finally made the All-Star roster, but not in the manner anyone wanted. He replaced Molinas, who was suspended from the Pistons and then by Commissioner Maurice Podoloff from the NBA for gambling.

The Molinas bubble burst on January 10, when he admitted to betting on Piston games through a New York bookmaker. It ended a month-long investigation on Molinas. He had been named to the All-Star team only four days before his suspension.

Don Meineke, Mel Hutchins and Molinas roomed together. Mel said, "Jack was raised with gambling. He would bet on anything. He wanted a place to gamble. But what he did had no influence on the way the game was played. No influence."

While it was only a footnote in NBA history, Molinas' suspension came as a severe blow to the aspiring Pistons. There had been no question of his fixing games, but he had to go. Aside from the personal shock — Frank Brian, for one, found him a personable companion — there was the waste of what everyone thought would be a dazzling career. Brian said, "He had everything, he was going to become a ball player. It was terrible." Some years later Molinas served a prison term in a college basketball scandal.

There was some discontent within the team regarding Paul Birch's coaching techniques. Owner Zollner had to squelch published rumors that former Piston Jerry Bush, who was coaching at Toledo University, would replace Birch.

Dike Eddleman summed up Birch's difficulties with his players by saying, "Birch didn't see eye-to-eye with anyone, not even himself."

As for Fred Schaus, he respected Birch's "good basketball mind" and the "Chick Davies stuff" the coach brought to the team, but he continued, "I've never run across a guy who treated people like he did." As an example, he said that when the team lost, Birch might make them sit in the dark on the *Flying Z* coming home.

There was more than one point of view about Birch. Andy Phillip saw him as a coach from the old school. He was tough and he treated the players the same way. For him coaching was no popularity contest.

It was not easy controlling a team of young, active men, especially on the road. Asked if there were hijinks in the hotels away from home, Phillip agreed there was. He remembered Fred Schaus and Dike Eddleman patrolling the halls draped in bedsheets, looking for their friends after curfew. When Birch spotted them, he demanded they return to their room. "Deep down," said Andy, "He was okay about it all."

He did have a reputation for expressing himself physically. He threw orange peels and liked kicking things to emphasize a point. The team knew this, in one game where they were losing at half time. They gathered in the locker room, ready for the peels to fly.

Trainer Stan Kenworthy always carried an oxygen mask in a small bag, ready for emergencies. The bag looked like any player's kit bag, so the team placed it in the middle of the floor, knowing that Birch would not be able to resist it. Sure enough, he kicked it, but the oxygen tank inside resisted more than a bagful of clothes would have.

Even George Yardley, whose career had been held back by Birch's attitude toward him, said, "I think Birch was as good a coach as I played for, a great disciplinarian. I don't think you have to like somebody to have a winning team." Professionals can play with anybody, not only their friends.

The Pistons were in a dogfight for second place in the western division behind the dominant Lakers. However, Molinas' slot remained empty until February when the Z's bought the contract of Leo Barnhorst from Baltimore. Charlie Share added some insult to injury when he came back to Fort Wayne's Coliseum and scored 22 points in a game which Fort Wayne fortunately won 72-71.

The Pistons made their national television debut on February 6 when the Dumont Network aired their game in Syracuse. The Nats won in overtime 93-87. It was one of a fourteen game schedule, which opened a tenuous trial marriage between network television and basketball. Boston, after four games, cancelled their viewing contract, claiming it was hurting their regular Sunday afternoon attendance.

By early February the Pistons had inched to a half-game lead over Rochester, but that was their last hurrah. The Royals pulled away in the final six weeks and almost caught the Lakers. Fort Wayne's 40-32 record was respectable, but remained six games behind Minneapolis and four games back of the Royals.

In the unusual round-robin playoff which followed, the Z's lost at Rochester, came home and lost to the Lakers 90-85, then flew to Minneapolis and another loss 78-73. Back in Fort Wayne, they were spanked by

the Royals 89-71. It was a far cry from their 1953 finish. Minneapolis knocked out Rochester in a two-of-three series and then beat Syracuse for the championship in a seven-game set.

The Pistons, in a season-closing promotion, had the fans vote on an all-time Piston team. There were more than 19,000 votes cast, selecting Bobby McDermott, Curly Armstrong, Mel Hutchins, Larry Foust and Andy Phillip.

The Pistons' final game with Rochester was on March 21. After a March 27 meeting, Paul Birch resigned, ending his three-year term as coach. It was apparent that Fred Zollner was not going to keep Birch, but he gave him the dignity of allowing him to resign.

Birch's statement read as follows: "It has been a pleasure to work with Mr. Zollner these past three seasons and I do feel that the record of the team shows steady improvement in that period, particularly in road games.

"After the Molinas incident and the subsequent investigation, the players worked hard to overcome this handicap as well as the handicap of a difficult schedule late in the season. Had it not been for these two handicaps, I believe we would have finished in second place in the Western Division and in a better position to compete in the playoffs.

"Unfortunately these handicaps were too great to overcome and I feel that it is best to bow out of the picture."

Zollner's statement also eliminated Carl Bennett from the basketball scene and placed himself in Fort Wayne's seat on the NBA Board of Governors.

"I wish to compliment Paul for his all-out effort and for his integrity. I'm sorry that situations developed with which he was unable to cope. My first job will be the careful selection of the best available man to coach the team. I am now considering three men who have never worn a Piston uniform and I expect to contact these men during the early part of April.

"It is also my intention of giving the new coach full authority, and in line with this, Carl Bennett is retiring from all phases of basketball. Carl has been overworked and will now concentrate all of his time on Zollner Productions presentations such as ice shows and Bruff Cleary Sports Promotions including professional boxing and wrestling, in addition to his regular work at the plant.

"With this new setup, I will represent the Pistons on the NBA Board of Governors and the new coach will have full authority in all other phases of the team operation."

Thus the 1953-54 campaign, which had opened with such optimism and enthusiasm, ended on a rather drab note with the question of who would be the next coach. Fred Zollner's quest for the best and thirst for first continued.

1954-55

Within three weeks, non-gambler Fred Zollner rolled the dice and named Charley Eckman, veteran college and NBA referee, as head coach and turned the basketball program over to him.

The announcement of a three-year contract stunned the Fort Wayne community and startled the basketball world. It had been Zollner's best-kept secret. Eckman's name had never entered any speculation. Carl Bennett was probably the most surprised. He had been Zollner's number one liaison with sports for fourteen years, but had no inkling of these plans.

Fred Zollner derived great enjoyment from doing the unexpected, pulling a big surprise, keeping a dark secret. His secret of hiring Eckman was probably the biggest of his sports life.

It was another Zollner surprise for Eckman when he was offered the job. Charley recalled it for a story by Alan Goldstein for the *Baltimore Sun* in June, 1990.

"I'm sitting at home in Baltimore," said Eckman, "when the operator said she was putting through a call from Golden Beach, FL, where all the millionaires went for a sun tan. It was ol' man Zollner. He wanted me to come down for a job interview. He said his was looking for a coach.

"It sounded crazy at first, but then I figured I had nothing to lose. I had \$38 to my name after spending all winter running around the country officiating high school, college and pro games. I also had a wife and three kids with big appetites. Why not take a shot at it?

"So I borrowed \$20 from the corner grocer and hopped a plane for Fort Lauderdale. By the time I got there, I was down to \$12. But there is a

chauffeur-driven Cadillac waiting for me at the airport. He drives me to a fancy beach-front hotel. I ordered a fifth of Canadian Club from room service. When I got hungry, I had the chauffeur drive me to Wolfie's for a hot dog. Then I went to bed.

"At 10 a.m. the next morning, Mr. Zollner is knocking on my door. He says, 'Charlie, can you coach my team?' I say, 'Absolutely. I can win a title with your guys.' And he says, 'I think you can, too.'

"So he calls a hotel stenographer and draws up a two-year contract that is going to be worth \$10,000 a year. Even if I get fired after the first year, the second is guaranteed. Plus, I got an extra \$1,500 for each playoff series that we won! I wound up making \$4,500 in bonus money those first two years. Making \$14,500 in those days was a lot of money for a coach, and I could thumb my nose at Red Auerbach in Boston and Joe Lapchick in New York."

Bob Renner, in the *News-Sentinel*, pointed out that "Eckman's only coaching background was as a recreational director in the Air Force during the war." Bob Reed, sports editor of the *Journal-Gazette*, said, "Searching for the proverbial needle in the haystack might present a comparatively easy task compared to putting a finger on the person who knew all along that Charley Eckman would be the next Zollner Piston basketball coach."

Zollner's official statement read as follows: "Charley Eckman was my no. 1 choice from the very beginning. It's now obvious why it was necessary to wait until the playoffs concluded.

"He meets all of our qualifications for the position. He has a thorough knowledge of basketball as it is played in the National Basketball Association because of his first hand association with all the teams in the league over a seven year period.

"Eckman has the respect for the players and owners in the league because of exemplary service as a official and for the same reason by fans throughout the league.

"He has developed a keen and analytical knowledge of players in the league which will be invaluable to us in the coming seasons. His college officiating over a 12-year period will be extremely helpful in developing rookies for the NBA's caliber of play.



Piston owner Fred Zollner with former NBA basketball referee Charley Eckman. In a 1954 surprise move, Zollner named Eckman to the piston coaching job.

"Charley has signed a three-year contract and will take over immediately with full authority, beginning with the player draft meeting in New York this week."

Eckman's reaction was quoted in the *News-Sentinel*: "I know I haven't had much coaching experience but I know I can get along with both the players and the fans. That's the big thing in coaching anyway, getting the boys to play together and keep them in a happy frame of mind. How much can anybody teach these players today, everybody is an All-American and knows the game backward and forward?"

It was the second time that a referee had been named coach. The other occasion had also occurred in Fort Wayne, when the Hoosiers in the old American League (1929) hired Lou (Doc) Sugarman as coach.

The *Journal-Gazette's* Bob Reed wrote: "So, the precedent of a referee as coach had a precedent in big league pro basketball here 25 years ago. Charley Eckman, however, is a vastly different type from Doc Sugarman, although it's questionable if he knows as much basketball. The good doctor was surpassed by none at that time in his knowledge of the game."

The optimism of the previous year turned to skepticism as the new season rolled in.

With classic Zollner timing, Eckman's appointment enabled him to join Fred at the NBA Board of Governors meeting and to participate in the annual college draft. The board meeting was historic in adopting the 24 second shot clock rule, and a firm fouling rule, limiting teams to six fouls per quarter, after which bonus foul shots were given to the offended team.

The Associated Press reported that the NBA attacked the fouling situation with 'dramatic vigor', and that Fred Zollner had led the charge.

Zollner was quoted as saying that the six foul limit would eliminate butcher-boy tactics and the 24 second limit would assure the defensive team that the offensive team would not be able to stall. It was an impressive debut for Zollner on the Board of Governors.

Eckman supported Zollner's initiatives, telling AP that everyone had been in favor of the new rules. The vote had been unanimous and the discussion without animosity. He declared that the regulations would be a shot in the arm for professional basketball, and so they were.

The genesis of the 24-second shot clock was the Pistons' famous 19-18 stalling win over Minneapolis in 1950. The impact of the change in 1954 was immediate. Team scoring jumped an average of 14 points per game; personal fouls fell from an average of 59 per game to less than 50. Boston became the first team to average more than 100 points a game.

The players were happy at the change, too. The faster game put an end to the habits of players who held the ball so long you could, as Dike Eddleman said, "almost go to sleep."

The first Eckman-Zollner college draft consisted of Dick Rosenthal (Notre Dame); Arnold Short (Oklahoma City College); Bertram Born (Kansas); Mel Thompson (North Carolina State); Clarence (Butch) Burch (Pittsburgh); Charlie Kraak (Indiana); Bernie Janicki (Duke); Don Bielke (Valparaiso); Phil Larsen (Brigham Young); Forrest Jackson (Taylor) and Joel Hittleman (Loyola of Baltimore).

Eckman made his first visit to Fort Wayne as coach after the NBA meeting, and spent a week talking to the press, radio and fans. He appeared on three Fort Wayne radio stations and WKJG-TV, and visited stations in Kalamazoo, South Bend, Lima, Indianapolis and Muncie. He covered a thousand miles in the week, then started a cross-country swing to contact draftees and make a personal visit to each of last year's squad members.

The best tactical move Eckman made was to choose to make these visits to Birch's leftovers. Team morale was at an all-time low. The reaction to Birch's hard-nosed tactics surfaced and it was up to Eckman to turn that around.

Eckman later stated that he knew Birch had a reputation as a wild man. Eckman also had a high opinion of George Yardley, whom Birch disliked. He told the players he would set a new standard, without yelling and with no set plays. He felt that the players were experienced and able to organize play on their own. By emphasizing the positive, Eckman tried to make them happy. His first choice was George Yardley.

The reaction was exactly what Eckman had hoped for. As Yardley said, "Charley's greatest attribute was that he treated us like human beings."²⁵ Yardley's career soared.

Eckman was said to have come to the team knowing only two plays. "If that's the truth," Frank Brian said, "He didn't let us know it. Anyway, two's enough. You have to have an offensive system that you can run, not plays. The system is what you need. It wasn't like having a set play."

Mel Hutchins remembered that Eckman had a basic instruction for the team: "If you need a basket, give the ball to Yardley or Hutchins."

Rosenthal, the number one draft pick, signed in June and brought all of the Notre Dame scoring records with him. Eckman made a fruitless

²⁵ quoted in Terry Pluto, *Tall Tales*, p.42-43.

trip to Pittsburgh in an attempt to talk Dick Groat into returning to Fort Wayne to play basketball during baseball's off-season. Groat was willing, but Branch Rickey of the Pittsburgh Pirates nixed the idea.

The Western Division seemed to be evening up when George Mikan retired from the Lakers, perhaps through a combination of bad knees and apprehension of the 24-second shot clock.

Fred Scolari was the only veteran to send back an unsigned contract, asking to be traded. Eckman's first call for practice was October 1, and thirteen candidates responded: Murray, Phillip, Yardley, Hutchins, Foust, Meineke, Rosenthal, Leo Corkery, Red Owens, Joel Hittleman, Zaslofsky, Zeke Sinicola, and Brian. Corkery, Owens, Hittleman and Sinicola were released during the seven-game exhibition schedule against Philadelphia, Baltimore and Minneapolis.

Veteran Paul (Lefty) Walther bought his way out of his Philadelphia contract and signed with Fort Wayne. Jack Kerris signed a contract for emergency purposes on a home game basis only. Although Kerris could not travel, he would be available for home games if needed. At six foot six, he was an asset. Rosenthal missed some of the training sessions as he was on the College All-Star tour against the Globetrotters, where he was voted the most valuable player on the coast-to-coast run.

Before the season opener, Murray was traded to Baltimore for Jim Fritsche, a second year player from Hamline University. The ten man squad of Foust, Phillip, Zaslofsky, Yardley, Hutchins, Walther, Fritsche, Rosenthal, Meineke and Brian opened with a 91-72 win at Milwaukee. The home opener, a 90-86 win over Boston, drew less than 3000. The fans were only mildly curious and still skeptical.

The Pistons made their Fort Wayne national television debut on the NBA's game-of-the-week on November 6, and beat the Knicks 90-83. The game was blacked out locally and drew only 1000 paying fans plus 2000 free Knot Hole Gang members. A Sunday night win over Rochester gave the Z's four straight and the western division lead. Even with the winning streak, only 2273 showed up the following Thursday when Syracuse broke it by nosing out Fort Wayne 88-86.

Scolari's contract had been traded to Boston for the rights to Bob Harris. Harris had broken in with the Pistons originally as an All-American under coach Hank Iba at Oklahoma A&M. He had been dealt to Boston in 1950. His career with the Celtics lasted three years. This time, he elected to stay retired.

Fort Wayne's fast sprint out of the chute gave them the western lead immediately. They lost it by a few percentage points to Minneapolis,



Piston coach Charley Eckman discusses strategy with Andy Phillip.

but it quickly returned. In late November the national television cameras came back to Fort Wayne for the NBA game-of-the-week. The Lakers themselves were the foe and the game decided the western lead. Hutchins scored 22 points and the Pistons had a huge 38-point fourth quarter to thump Minneapolis 98-81.

The turnaround in the Pistons' performance against the Lakers this season was substantial. Aside from the changes in their own organization, the absence of George Mikan on the other side made a big difference. As Carl Bennett commented, when Mikan was present, "he dominated the game." Without him, the Lakers were a team the Pistons could face on a more equal footing.

As for the players' perception of televised games, according to Andy Phillip they did not think about it much. "We were out there to have fun and make a living. No one perceived the marketing value of television." Broadcast sports at the time usually meant boxing, wrestling or roller skating. However, every-one soon learned the importance of the new medium when sports on television mushroomed.

The tottering Baltimore franchise finally collapsed and the players were parcelled out to the surviving clubs. The Pistons got Al Roges. The other teams picked up Frank Selvy (to Milwaukee); Don Henrickson (Rochester); Bob Houbregs (Boston); Connie Simmons (Syracuse); ex-Piston Ken Murray (Philadelphia). Bob Leonard, who was in the military, went to Minneapolis. Al McGuire and three others were not drafted. Eckman had been hopeful of getting Simmons to help spell Foust.

A new schedule was planned to assure the full 72 games, but three weeks later the league backtracked. They decided not to count the games Baltimore had already played, which shuffled the standings and individual scoring slightly. The situation did not affect the Pistons' lead, which now stood at 18 wins in 23 games, and nine straight in the Western Division.

Fan approval of the Pistons' new look continued to be slow in arriving. In early December, Jim Costin wrote in the *News-Sentinel* the Z's were exciting "all NBA cities but Fort Wayne."

He continued, "Of the eight cities participating in the National Basketball Association, seven are excited about the 'new look' Zollner Pistons.

"The eighth, Fort Wayne, can't seem to get too enthused about pro basketball, despite its quality, or as was the case Thursday at the Coliseum, quantity." The Thursday crowd was 3832 for an NBA double-header in which the Pistons won their sixth straight 116-98 over Boston, and Milwaukee beat Minneapolis 177-108. Ben Tenney had said the

crowd was "far short of what is needed to foot the bill for a double-header."

Costin went on, "Proof of this year's 'new look' popularity and crowd-pleasing style of play was best exemplified in New York last Tuesday, just following a 92-90 victory over the Minneapolis Lakers.

"Some 9200 fans were in the Garden that evening and after the Fort Wayne club had come from far behind to edge the defending champs, the entire crowd saluted it and Charley Eckman with a standing ovation. Even in Rochester the following evening, many Rochester natives cheered the Pistons' style of play and spirit.

"No less than 17 New York newspaper and radio men visited the Piston comeback win over the Lakers."

Fred Zollner finally got a break in a player dispersal when another franchise folded. Bob Houbregs, originally Milwaukee's first draft choice, was assigned to Boston and the Celtics elected to hang on to hometown favorite Tony Palazzi. All-American Houbregs was put on waivers. For the \$500 waiver price, the Pistons found 'a million dollar baby in the five and ten cent store.' He was vital to Fort Wayne in the following years. With Houbregs signed, Eckman cut Jim Fritsche and Al Roges.

Fred's mother, Margaret Zollner, died on December 11, 1954, while visiting at her son's Florida vacation retreat.

By December 22, the Pistons had a comfortable five-game lead over Minneapolis. Fred Zollner's stunning move of naming a referee to coach his team was reaping huge dividends. Assured of first place by January 1, Eckman earned the head coaching job for the Western Division for the fifth NBA All-Star game, which would take place January 18 in New York. Al Cervi had to wait until December 30 to cinch the eastern head coach job, his Syracuse Nationals having a slim game-and-a-half margin over New York.

Despite the advantages of the *Flying Z*, the players still spent a lot of time away from home in hotels. Asked what they did to keep amused, Andy Phillip said, "We got into groups and went to the movies. Or slept."

As the season neared the halfway mark, Foust and Yardley were leading the Fort Wayne scoring with more than 16 point averages. Hutchins, Brian and Phillip were all in double figures.

Yardley, Phillip and Foust were named to the All-Star team. The rest of the western division stars were Vern Mikkelsen, Jim Pollard and Slater Martin from Minneapolis; Frank Selvy and Bob Pettit of Milwaukee, and Bobby Wanzer and Arnie Risen of Rochester. The eastern squad had Carl Braun, Harry Gallatin and Dick McGuire (New York);

Dolf Schayes and Paul Seymour (Syracuse); Paul Arizin and Neil Johnston (Philadelphia); Ed Macauley, Bob Cousy and Bill Sharman (Boston). Schayes, Cousy and Selvy were unanimous selections.

The east beat the west 100-91 before 13,148 fans at Madison Square Garden. Eckman, having blown the whistle in a previous All-Star game, set a personal record. He is the only man to have officiated and been a coach at an All-Star game.

Through 42 games of the 72 game schedule, the Pistons kept pulling away from Minneapolis. The Lakers straggled five-and-a-half games back and Rochester trailed by eleven-and-a-half. As the Z's picked up steam, so did fan support. Elkhart opened a new high school gym and a Minneapolis game there attracted 6200. The Piston civic committee staged a Piston Appreciation Night at the Coliseum, drawing 6653 to watch Fort Wayne smother Rochester 105-84.

Zollner was presented with a plaque and the players received watches and gold basketballs.

A slowed-down Bob Davies of Rochester had missed being named an All-Star for the first time; he announced his retirement at the end of the season to coach Gettysburg College. The Pistons took the opportunity of this special occasion to present their longtime foe with a plaque commemorating his brilliant play against them through the years.

As the Pistons steamrolled their way to a first-place finish in their division, Fred Zollner's championship dreams seemed in sight. The big disappointment was attendance at home games. When the fans' appreciation night for the best team in basketball could not pack Memorial Coliseum, it may have foreshadowed the future move to another city.

Take, for example, a series with second-place Minneapolis. The Lakers were scrapping to stay in the race and drew 7400 fans for the Saturday night game, which the Pistons won. The following night in Fort Wayne, only 3700 showed up for another Z's win which, in practical terms, cemented the Pistons division championship.

At one point the Zollner lead was seven games, but leg injuries to both Yardley and Phillip cut the roster to eight players for a time and the Pistons played .500 ball through the final 28 games. Yardley missed twelve games, Phillip eight.

The NBA dropped the round-robin playoff system adopted the previous year. Instead, there was a best of three elimination round between the second and third place finishers in the division, followed by a best three-of-five series against the regular season champs. The final series (east versus west) would be on a four-of-seven series. The team

with the highest regular season record would have the home court advantage for the championship playoffs.

A problem for the Pistons was the fact that they did not have a home court to play on. The American Bowling Congress moved into the Coliseum in early March to build 38 bowling alleys for the annual national tournament, which would attract thousands of tourists to Fort Wayne for a two-month period. The Pistons played their final Coliseum date on March 4 and clinched the title two days later.

It looked as if Al Cervi would find himself in a familiar situation. In the old National League battles, he was virtually the only player in the league who could stop Fort Wayne's Bobby McDermott. Now he was coaching the Syracuse Nats who were a sure winner in the eastern division and contending with the Pistons for home court advantage in the playoffs.

A seven-game winning streak near the end of the season allowed the Nats to tie Fort Wayne's mark of 43-29. Syracuse had been the Zollners' nemesis in regular season play, winning seven of the nine games between the teams. The Pistons kept a clean slate in Syracuse, never winning a game in the Onondaga Coliseum.

The Syracuse jinx was almost unbelievable. Fort Wayne had manhandled the defending champion Lakers nine out of twelve times and Rochester eight out of twelve times during the campaign. They still went 2-7 against the Nats.

At this time the Piston team was handcrafted by Zollner, almost as if it had come off the drawing board at his aluminum piston plant. Fred had handpicked each player after assessing their skills elsewhere. Only Foust and Brian could be regarded as Piston originals in the NBA. The shocking hiring of Eckman proved to be the icing on the cake.

Eckman's loose and good-humored approach, his tendency to depend on the knowledge of his veteran players and the weakened state of their great rivals in Minneapolis and Rochester, led the Pistons to the top.

The Pistons and Nationals waited in the wings while the semifinals determined the division finalists. The Lakers eliminated Rochester. Boston was a mildly surprising winner over New York, beating the Knicks 116-109 in the deciding game.

Playing at Elkhart, the Pistons opened with a 96-79 win over the Lakers and the series moved to the Indianapolis Coliseum. An estimated 3000 saw the Elkhart game. A weird 98-97 overtime win for Fort Wayne in Indianapolis sent the Pistons two-up. The Z's shut out Minneapolis in the overtime period and Phillip's free throw with 1:02 on the clock was the only score.



Zollner Pistons, 1954-55. Top L to R: Don Meineke, Frank Brian. Middle L to R: trainer Stan Kenworthy, Dick Rosenthal, George Yardley, Jim Fritsche, Mel Hutchins, Larry Foust, Andy Phillip. Front L to R: Max Zaslofsky, Lefty Walther, coach Charley Eckman

The third game, in Minneapolis, also went into overtime. The Lakers won this one 99-91. Whitey Skoog hit two clutch free throws in the last five seconds to send the game into an extra period. Yardley had 25 points and Skoog unexpectedly led Minneapolis with 24.

The Pistons won the division championship with a convincing 105-96 finale at Minneapolis. Dick Rosenthal chipped in 21 points to match Hutchins for scoring honors. Syracuse marched through Boston in three of four games to set up the Piston-Nat playoff for the title.

The irony in Fort Wayne playing Syracuse for the NBA championship lay in the fact that the two smallest cities in the league were vying for the title. Big city fans laughed about Fort Wayne being a whistle-stop in the west, and Syracuse being a truck-stop near the Arctic circle.

The arenas in those big cities had the most seats, but the old National League teams drew the fans to fill them. Up to 1954, all four of the NBA championships had gone to Minneapolis and Rochester, and another looked like it was going to go west as well.

The Zollners still faced the problem of not having their home court to play on. The NBA turned down a request to return to their original home, the North Side High School gym, because the floor was not large enough for NBA specifications.

As in the semifinals, the Indianapolis Coliseum would have to be Fort Wayne's "home" court, and their hometown fans would have to go to Indy to support the team. The Nats had won the right to the home court advantage by beating the Z's seven out of nine times during the regular season.

The odds board was tilted heavily for Syracuse. The Pistons had lost 24 straight times there. The club owners had little in common. Danny Biasone owned some bowling alleys while Zollner was a wealthy industrialist. According to Eckman, Fred had loaned the NBA money in the early days to stay alive; his capital had enabled the league to struggle to its feet. Biasone, on the other hand, began the playoffs by launching a fundraising drive to ensure the Nats could keep going in 1955-56.

The two things Fred and Biasone had in common were that they both liked to sit on the players' bench and they wanted their teams to be to basketball what Green Bay was to football.

Years later Johnny Kerr, the big Syracuse center, would quip, "When Fort Wayne got tossed out for the bowling tournament, all I could think was, 'Thank god Danny Biasone owns his own bowling alley, so we don't have to worry about the bowlers kicking us out of Syracuse.'"

So the truck stop and the whistle stop rolled out the ball on March 31 at Syracuse for the opening game. It was less than a year since Eckman had turned in his striped shirt to become the Piston coach. This was Fred Zollner's most important series.

More than 7500 Syracuse faithful filled Onondaga Memorial Coliseum. The Pistons lost their 25th straight game in Syracuse 86-82. The Nats took an early twelve-point lead but by halftime the Z's had pulled within four points.

With seven and a half minutes to go, Fort Wayne led 75-71, but Red Rocha and Earl Lloyd sparked the Nats' driving finish. Foust with 26, Hutchins with 14 and Yardley at 13 paced the Z's; Rocha had 19 and Paul Seymour 17.

Syracuse went two-up two nights later with an 87-84 win. The Nats started early, leading 49-38; the Pistons caught them in the third quarter. Frankie Brian had 15 points in the second half and 20 in the game. Yardley had 21 and Hutchins 14.

The third game at Indianapolis drew 3200 fans and the Pistons won 96-89. The Z's rolled to a 15-point lead in the third quarter and five players wound up in double figures: Hutchins, 23; Foust, 17; Brian, 16; Bob Houbregs, 12; Andy Phillip, 11.

Fort Wayne evened the series in the fourth game in one of their best offensive shows of the year. At one point they were 18 points ahead and wound up winning 109-102. A disappointing 2611 fans turned out on a spring-like evening. Seven Zollner players were in double figures: Brian, 18; Hutchins, 17; Foust and Phillip, 15; Yardley and Meineke, 12; Houbregs, 10.

The Pistons moved to within one game of the championship in the fifth game, nosing out the Nats 74-71. The explosive Z's once again zoomed to a 15 point lead in the third quarter, but came close to losing it after a furious finish by Syracuse in the fourth. The Nats pulled themselves up to 72-71, but Brian made two last-second free throws for the win.

Mel Hutchins later paid tribute to Brian's ability to put the ball where it needed to go. "He was strong and fast. He would go through a wall if he thought the ball was there. He didn't give off many assists, but when he went for the basket, get out of the way."

That sent the series back to Syracuse. Fort Wayne was within one game of the title, but they would have to do it in 'never-never land', where they could not seem to win.

True to their playoff form, the Pistons jumped to an early lead, 27-19 at the quarter. A brawl erupted when Houbregs and Syracuse's Wally Osterkorn scrambled over a loose ball. Police had to break up the melee and technicals were given to both benches, but there were no player ejections. The Piston lead was whittled down to two (55-53) at the half. Going into the last quarter, Fort Wayne led 84-78. Hutchins fouled out at 9:15. With seven minutes to go, the Pistons led by four. Syracuse caught up 103-103 with two minutes on the clock, and went on to win 109-104. This sent the series into a seventh game. Yardley was brilliant, getting 31 points and 12 rebounds. Brian had 24 points and eight assists. Schayes' 28 points and 12 rebounds led the Nats.

The playoffs could not get much closer. In six games, the Pistons had scored 549 points to Syracuse's 544. Schayes led all scorers with 120 points; Yardley had 101. Brian had 92; Foust 87 and Hutchins 83.

The final game went right down to the wire. It was a finish worthy of the movies. Bob Reed described it in the *Journal-Gazette*: "George King of the Syracuse Nationals dropped in a free throw with 12 seconds remaining and thus beat out Fort Wayne's Pistons by 92-91 this afternoon for the world's championship of professional basketball.

"It was the all-time heart-breaker for the Pistons, who were within 1:22 of the finish line still holding a lead and who at one time in the first half had held a 17-point lead.

"A crowd of 6697 saw the title game and went wild at the Nats were presented the championship trophy by league president Maurice Podoloff."²⁶

Fort Wayne had outshot Syracuse from the field, but the Nats hit 40 of 49 free throws and the Zollners 25 of 34. Foust led all scorers with 24; Brian had 19; Hutchins 13 and Phillip 10. King had 15 for Syracuse.

Describing the last twelve seconds of the game after King's free throw, Johnny Kerr remembered: "Andy Phillip had the ball for Fort Wayne and he dribbled into the corner against Paul Seymour. When he did, George King left his man and then he and Seymour double-teamed Phillip, King stealing the ball. That was the ball game."²⁷

The Pistons flew home on the *Flying Z*. A tumultuous welcome awaited them when they touched down on the evening of Easter Sunday. Some 4000 fans greeted them as heroes at Zollner's hangar.

²⁶ *Journal-Gazette*, April 10, 1955.

²⁷ Terry Pluto, *Tall Tales*, p.48.

The players' pool for the series awarded \$1400 to each Syracuse player, \$1250 to each of the Pistons. Yardley later said that Fred Zollner had promised each team member a \$500 watch if they won.

Nonetheless, Fred did present Charley Eckman with a substantial bonus for bringing the Pistons to the divisional championship and also raised his salary for the coming season.

Heart-warming as the welcome home ceremonies were, the Pistons were emotionally and physically drained. They felt their pockets had been picked, either by George King or the officials. They had proved themselves as the best team in basketball, until the last twelve seconds.

One of the Pistons observed, "The officials evened it up. It was a lousy game and on TV, so they made a game out of it. It was uncalled for. Sometimes if the game wasn't working, the officials would tend to overlook things and let it even up."

At one point during the season they had a seven-game lead over Minneapolis in the West and Syracuse in the East. The Z's had blown a 17-point half-time lead on a Syracuse floor, where they had never won a game, and lost the championship.

There was the predictable moaning and groaning — the "we-wuz-robbed" wailing. A post-game column by Bob Reed, the conservative sports editor of *The Journal-Gazette*, may have had more impact on Fort Wayne's future in the NBA than anyone realized at the time.

"May the Better Team Win"

"Sunday noon, just before the final battle in Syracuse, we were sitting in the coffee shop of the Onondaga Hotel in a group that included a few Piston players. Maurice Podoloff, president of the National Basketball Association, who had just finished his lunch at another table, came over to exchange a few pleasantries and departed with the well-worn expression of any sports executive in a similar position:

"'May the better team win.' And he added: 'That doesn't always happen.'

"We wondered if he remembered that about five hours later as he was presenting the championship trophy to the Syracuse Nationals. Because his words turned out to be so strangely prophetic. For the better team didn't win."

The curtain fell on the 1954-55 season when Zollner and Eckman had a meeting with the players at the piston plant. All the players were on hand except Max Zaslofsky who had hitched a ride back to New York

from Syracuse. The thoughtful Zollner prepaid the players their share of the runner-up loot from the NBA pool so they would not have to wait for their checks from the league.

1955-56

The new look of the Pistons had come full circle since Eckman had been named basketball chief a year before. As the world champion softballers had disbanded in September, 1954, there was no athletic business office at the plant. Publicist Al Busse had moved on to work in Madison Square Garden's promotion office, and Carl Bennett and Rodger Nelson had departed the scene, leaving Phil Olofson as Zollner's chief aide on the business side and Eckman in charge of the team. Zollner became more personally involved in the executive end of the franchise and was actually calling every shot.

The business office had moved downtown to the Keenan Hotel. The major ticket accesses were no longer Vim Sporting Goods Store or Bud Fisher's Harrison Hill Drug Store or the personnel window at Zollner Machine Works. Zollner's private family sports dynasty was going more public and welcomed community participation in, among other things, a season ticket sale drive.

Pro basketball was reaching a new plateau. The 24-second clock had been an astounding success, providing a running game, a higher scoring game, exactly what the NBA founders had in mind. Scoring jumped from an average of 79.5 to 93.1 points per game. The minimal television exposure had had a big effect in a few scattered games in the season and the championship playoffs. Television suggested new things on the horizon.

Things were humming at the Zollner plant with Fred's hand-picked executives, management, engineers, draftsmen, craftsmen and staffs well-gearred. It allowed Zollner the luxury, for once, of less hands-on management and more enjoyment of a Golden Beach, Florida, vacation retreat which would eventually be his home.

He was persistent in his basketball dreams of making pro basketball a national sport just as he had spread the gospel of softball through his "major league" efforts. He pursued the idea by announcing his basketball team would have pre-season training, as the softball and baseball pros did.



Zollner Pistons' "big" scoring threats of 1955-56 were L to R, Mel Hutchins, Larry Foust and George Yardley.

It would be 'fall training' in late September or early October, and would include some exhibitions with other pro teams. The Pistons also scheduled two more regular season trips for the Florida fans even though the previous two seasons' trial runs had not been fruitful.

One of the Florida junkets included a league game against Boston in Charlotte, North Carolina, and a St. Louis home game in New Orleans.

The Flying Z's engines had barely cooled off from the historic homecoming before the propellers whirred away again to start the 1955-56 season. After the team meeting in Fred's office, Zollner, Eckman, Olofson and a couple of media persons were on board to go to New York for an NBA board meeting and the college draft.

There was a lot of speculation about what might happen to the NBA runners-up. Paul (Lefty) Walther already had announced retirement. There was speculation about veterans Frank Brian and Max Zaslofsky. Yardley, who led the team in all games with a seventeen-point average, usually had a summer reluctance for commitment or early practice. Dick Rosenthal was headed for the armed services.

So the draft was important, perhaps more than usual. Eckman passed up Notre Dame's Jack Stephens for Jim Horan, six-foot-eight center from Dayton, as Fort Wayne's first choice. Second choice was Jesse Arnelle, of Penn State, a rugged six-foot-five 225-pounder who also had been drafted by the Cleveland Browns in the National Football League.

Dick Groat was starring for the Pittsburgh Pirates in baseball, but still yearned to play basketball for the Pistons. The Pirates' Branch Rickey was reluctant to give that permission.

Despite many rumors of new franchises, the league remained stable, but some teams were shaky financially. After teasing about moving his team to Indianapolis or Des Moines, the restless and opportunistic Ben Kerner got the governors' approval to move to St. Louis, which proved to be a money-wise decision.

Besides approving Milwaukee's move to St. Louis, the Board of Governors' meeting was significant in showing that the NBA was getting on the right track. The league split up its first network television money (\$40,000). The Pistons' share was \$3,000 for one home game. Rochester and Minneapolis had not had a televised game and Zollner graciously gave the Lakers and Royals \$1000 each.

The player draft was opened to the press for the very first time. Top pick was Tom Gola of LaSalle, who went to the Philadelphia Warriors. Because of their home-town draw, players whose colleges were within a fifty mile radius of the franchise became preferential bonus drafts.

George Senesky, former Warrior star who had succeeded Eddie Gottlieb as coach at Philly, now had a formidable lineup that included scoring leaders Neil Johnston and Paul Arizin. It boded well for them in the upcoming campaign.

The Pistons' Larry Foust was named to the NBA All-Star team along with Milwaukee's Bob Pettit, Arnie Johnson, Boston's Bob Cousy and Dolph Schayes of Syracuse. No Pistons made the second team, which included Slater Martin and Vern Mikkelsen, of Minneapolis; Paul Seymour, of Syracuse; Bill Sharman, of Boston; and Harry Gallatin, of New York.

Gottlieb welcomed the idea of his Warriors playing the training games in Florida and the expansive Zollner said he hoped to take a couple of games out of the Miami area, perhaps to Havana, Cuba.

Rochester was building a new Coliseum and was awarded the NBA All-Star game in January. The league settled for the same 72-game schedule starting November 5th. The Pistons did not get a chance to sign their number two draft pick, Jesse Arnelle, who was lured to the Harlem Globetrotters by their summer European tour.

In early June, prime draft pick Horan had signed and owner Zollner gave Eckman a new three-year contract through April of 1958.

Eckman said, "A nice increase in pay was included and I certainly am happy of the faith shown to me by the move. I hope I can justify that new pay by fine showings with the Z's the next few seasons."

The Pistons strengthened their back court by purchasing Philadelphia's second draft choice, Walter (Corky) Devlin, of George Washington. Eckman was worried about the back court, having lost Walther to retirement, Brian "on the bubble," and Rosenthal to the service. Zollner's coach was also trying to make a trade for Don Meineke.

Fred Zollner's own front office was changing. He hired Marjorie Bowstrom as his personal secretary. Replacing a retiring secretary would be quite routine normally, but Mrs. Bowstrom, with her experienced background as administrative assistant and corporate secretary to the Washington, D.C., Armory Board, was exceptional. She became an integral part of the Zollner operation.

Her responsibilities increased through the years and, later, she became Fred's assistant in 1967 when he was named chairman of the board and CEO. She was elected to the Zollner board of directors in 1976, then assistant chairman and assistant CEO in 1978. When Zollner died in 1982, Mrs. Bowstrom was elected chairman of the board and CEO, a position she held until her retirement in 1990.



Zollner Corporation chief executive officer Marjorie Bowstrom

An active sports fan, Marjorie particularly enjoyed her association with the basketball team, both in Fort Wayne and Detroit, until Zollner sold the team to Bill Davidson of Detroit in 1974. One of her fervent hopes had been to see Fred Zollner inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Massachusetts, for his indelible contributions to professional basketball.

Reality and practicality prevailed over the fantasy Florida training plan. It was replaced by a rigorous sixteen-game exhibition schedule, with St. Louis, Philadelphia, and Syracuse providing the competition. Sandwiched in would be a Memorial Coliseum date with the College All-Stars, Fort Wayne's only home showing before the season started. The All-Stars, one of whom was the Pistons' Corky Devlin, scheduled meetings with six NBA clubs during the pre-season.

Branch Rickey vetoed another Piston plea for Dick Groat's part-time service in basketball. Frank Brian announced his retirement in early October. Meineke was traded to Rochester in a straight player deal for Odie Spears.

The University of Louisville's Chuck Noble came in for a tryout after spending one season with the Akron Goodyears in AAU play.

The Piston Civil Action Committee wound up its season ticket sales campaign and fell slightly short of the 2,500 goal; public figures were never disclosed. But selling more than 2,000 season tickets was still a hallmark figure in the NBA. Rumors persisted about moving the Fort Wayne franchise to a larger city but Zollner's pat answer remained, "If the fans prove they want us we have no plans to move."

Eckman called the team's first practice for October 5th and with only four veterans and ten rookies answering the opening bell, the ambitious 'play-into-shape' exhibition schedule seemed more appropriate than the original Florida training plan.

The veterans were Andy Phillip, Max Zaslofsky, Bob Houbregs and Odie Spears (with previous experience at Chicago and Rochester). The rookies were Jim Horan, Don Bielke, Connie Mack Rae, Corky Devlin, Chuck Noble, Mack Williams, George Glasgow, Farleigh Dickinson, John O'Boyle, Charlie Mock, and Tom Mixon. Foust, still unsigned, was on hand in street clothes. Within a week, Foust signed, and Yardley and Hutchins had joined the club.

Eckman called the first two exhibitions against St. Louis practice games and used rookies extensively. The College All-Stars came to Fort Wayne on October 20th and the Pistons came to life for a 97-93 victory before a disappointing turnout of only 2524 fans. The Zollners had ruffled

a few NBA feathers by insisting on one of the All-Star dates and the *News-Sentinel* sports editor Ben Tenny wondered if the Pistons had made a booking mistake.

Noble looked good enough to Eckman that the Pistons bought his contract rights from Philadelphia. Compared to their flying start a year ago when they were undefeated in pre-season games, 1955-56 was a disaster. The Z's lost two to St. Louis, five of six to Philadelphia and split six games with Syracuse. The eleven players to survive the final cuts were Phillip, Spears, Noble, Zaslofsky, Yardley, Horan, Foust, Bielke, Houbregs, Hutchins, and Devlin.

The weekend of November 5-6 was set as the opener for the NBA, labeled the toughest league in pro history. The Pistons opened against the league champs at Syracuse. It was an overtime thriller before nearly 3800 noisy Nats' fans and the Z's managed to blow a five-point lead with 2:04 left to play and lost 114-113. Rookie Jim Tucker of Duquesne hit the final shot with two seconds on the clock to give Fort Wayne its 29th straight loss in Syracuse.

Fort Wayne set an opening night home record of 6535 the following night at Memorial Coliseum and were outdueled by Minneapolis, 96-95. The Lakers were almost wire-to-wire winners, losing the lead just once (67-66 in the third quarter). Clyde Lovellette, off to a fast start, led the winners with thirty-one points. Foust had twenty-five for the Z's but the Pistons paraded to the foul line for sixty shots, making only forty-three of them. Opening weekend found Fort Wayne as the only team with two losses.

The two one-point losses jolted Fort Wayne fans into the reality that only six of last year's championship runners-up were still on the Zollner roster: Hutchins, Yardley, Foust, Phillip, Zaslofsky and Houbregs. The five newcomers were melding in. Gone were Rosenthal, Meineke, Brian and Walther.

The next weekend found the Z's slipping to 0-3 when they lost to Rochester, 84-79, in the first half of a double-header at St. Louis, losing a 14-point halftime lead in the process. Bobby Wanzer, now coaching the Royals, had twenty-five points.

Then it was back to the Coliseum for another double-header and another shot at the champion Syracuse club. New York tumbled Rochester in the opener 94-91 and the Pistons charged into the win column by whomping the Nats 93-79, this time coming from behind with a four-point deficit at halftime. Houbregs led the way with twenty-two; Foust had

nineteen, and Yardley fifteen. The Bird was sensational off the glass, grabbing seventeen rebounds. Rookie Devlin chipped in with eleven.

The scenario worsened when the Pistons were whacked by New York 110-88 in the opening game of a doubleheader on the jinxed Syracuse floor. They reverted to their old form of losing the close ones, a 104-102 loss at Boston and then came home November 20th to tackle the Knicks again.

Fort Wayne's record dipped to a frightening 1-6 as New York took an overtime 119-115 win in front of 4413 fans. At one point the Z's had a sixteen-point lead. In the free scoring battle Foust had thirty, Spears had his best high with eighteen, tying Yardley; and Zaslofsky popped in twenty-one. Harry Gallatin's twenty-five and Sweetwater Clifton's twenty-three lead the New Yorkers.

Even with a 104-93 Thanksgiving night game over Rochester before a crowd of 5535, the Zollners were last in the league at 2-6. Attendance was running thirty-five percent ahead of the previous year.

With such a slow start, roster changes were inevitable. Almost unnoticed, a milestone was passed when the Zollners signed Jesse Arnelle, the first black ever to ink a Fort Wayne contract. Although he had not signed after being their number two draft choice, the European tour of the Globetrotters was over and the Penn State six-foot-five star wanted to take a crack at the NBA. He played in the November 24th game at the Coliseum, hitting one of eight shots and fouling out.

To make room for Arnelle, Don Bielke was released. The ensuing road game at Philadelphia was also Max Zaslofsky's final pro game. The ten-year veteran was released in a surprise move since he was averaging nearly ten points a game. Jim Holstein, released by the Minneapolis Lakers, was signed to fill the Zaslofsky slot.

After Holstein signed, Eckman finally abandoned his number one draft choice, Horan. Horan was given his outright release after several trade potentials. One rumor had Zaslofsky and Horan traded to St. Louis, the Hawks' Charlie Share to Minneapolis, and Slater Martin, of Minneapolis, to Fort Wayne, but it did not happen.

By the December 1 deadline, the team had pared down its personnel. The Pistons finally crawled out of the cellar as 4909 fans enjoyed a 111-90 win over the Celtics at the Coliseum. All ten players scored and the win gave Fort Wayne a 5-8 record, tying Rochester for second behind St. Louis and ahead of Minneapolis's 5-11 mark. Arnelle had a good night with eleven. Fred Zollner flew in from Florida to see his new team.

Consecutive wins over Syracuse, 90-88 at St. Louis, and 105-94 in Fort Wayne gave Fort Wayne its longest winning streak of the year at three, and finally shot them into contention. In the latter game at the Coliseum, Noble had his best pro night with twenty-eight. A 117-116 loss at Rochester and a 96-91 win over Philadelphia tightened the race. In mid-December the standings looked like this:

Eastern Division			
	W	L	PCT
Philadelphia	12	5	.706
New York	10	7	.588
Boston	8	7	.533
Syracuse	9	9	.500

Western Division			
	W	L	PCT
Rochester	9	9	.500
Fort Wayne	8	9	.471
St. Louis	8	9	.471
Minneapolis	5	14	.208

The Pistons promptly lost their momentum, dropping three straight, two as opening doubleheaders in the East and the third, a nationally-televised game from Fort Wayne. New York won the Saturday afternoon game 90-85, before 2985 fans at the Coliseum and a national TV audience. It was the lowest turnout of the year for the Z's for a home game. There was some speculation that people stayed home to see the novelty of basketball on television.

The Lakers followed New York into the Coliseum the next night. Fort Wayne stopped its slide and beat the Lakers, 96-86. While in town Minneapolis picked up the contract of Jim Horan from the Z's for \$500. The number one draft pick played against his former teammates, being shut out in a brief appearance.

The Pistons used the win over the Lakers as a springboard for a six-game winning streak which shot Fort Wayne into the division lead for the first time this season. It happened in Rochester in the first part of a December twin bill over St. Louis 83-67, giving Fort Wayne a slim .002 percentage point lead over the Hawks. Four nights later in Lansing, the Z's beat the Hawks, 90-89, assuring Eckman the Western Division coaching job for the All-Star game.

The first Sunday matinee of the season drew 5531 to watch the Zollners win their sixth straight 85-68 on New Year's Day and pull away to a three-game lead in the Western Division. The Lakers broke the streak two nights later in a double bill in St. Louis, 95-89, despite twenty-five points by Foust.

Hutchins, Yardley and Foust were named to the Western Division All-Star team with Mikkelsen, Lovellette and Martin, Minneapolis; Maurice Stokes and Bobby Wanzer, Rochester; and Bob Pettit and Bob Harrison of St. Louis. The Eastern squad had Dick McGuire, Carl Braun and Harry Gallatin, New York; Jack George, Neil Johnston and Paul Arizin, Philadelphia; Dolph Schayes, Syracuse; and Bill Sharman, Bob Cousy and Easy Ed Macauley, Boston. The game was set for January 24th at Rochester's new coliseum, where attendance had been lagging. One game had drawn less than one thousand spectators.

In mid-January George Mikan came out of retirement to help the dawdling Lakers. The largest Minneapolis crowd in three years, 7122 turned out to see his return as he helped the Lakers to a 117-94 romp over the Pistons. George scored eleven. The Pistons got even the next night in Fort Wayne, 104-99, as Mikan scored ten. Fort Wayne's centers, Foust and Houbregs, managed forty between them, Hoops getting twenty-three of them.

Devlin received his army draft call and Eckman immediately talked Frank Brian out of retirement and into joining the team in time for a southern swing. There were games in Charlotte and Miami Beach plus a game in New Orleans against St. Louis to attract Bob Pettit's Louisiana State followers.

Boston beat the Pistons 91-85 in Charlotte and 90-85 in Miami Beach, during which Jesse Arnelle suffered a broken nose and went to a Miami hospital. Brian came back and had six and fourteen points in the two games. Meanwhile, Devlin was rejected by the Indianapolis draft board for a chronic back problem. Eckman signed NBA veteran Chuck Cooper, who had just been released by St. Louis. The roster scramble gave a temporary college scouting job to Jim Holstein, injured reserve status to Arnelle and the ten-man roster now included Cooper, Devlin and Brian.

Some 5171 turned out when the Z's finally came home to face Rochester on January 22nd. Wins over St. Louis and the Warriors gave them an even break on the road. They thumped Rochester 111-93 in their homecoming. Devlin, now fighting for his job, had a good game scoring eighteen, while Cooper had nine and Brian had eight.

Fort Wayne welcomed the All-Star break, enjoying a four-and-one-half-game lead over Rochester, five-and-one-half over Minneapolis. They were eight games ahead of St. Louis. The All-Star game drew 8517, the largest crowd at an indoor sporting event in Rochester. The West, under Eckman, won 108-94. Pettit led all scorers with twenty; Foust had nine; Hutchins, eleven; and Yardley, eight. Johnston led the East with seventeen.

At the NBA Governors' meeting, player representatives asked for five contract and rule changes: (1) No automatic \$15 fine for speaking to referees; (2) Severance pay for sold or transferred players; (3) Moving expenses for players traded to other clubs; (4) No more than three banquet or party appearances per player during the season, excluding news interviews and charity events; and (5) A limit of twenty exhibition games before and during the season.

After the All-Star Game, Fort Wayne picked up the pace and won five straight, giving them seven in a row including the wins over St. Louis and Philadelphia at the end of their southern excursion. Their division lead ballooned to seven games over Minneapolis and St. Louis before the Hawks snapped the string by 98-90 in St. Louis on February 2nd. Arnelle remained on the injured reserve list; there was no spot open for him.

Aرنelle finally made a road trip to Rochester when Hutchins suffered a sprained ankle but that was the end of his pro career. He played thirty-one games and achieved a 4.7 point scoring average.

As Fort Wayne spread-eagled the Western Division, Philadelphia was doing the same in the Eastern half. The Warriors had made the jump from last place in 1954-55 to first place this season. There was some irony in that the Pistons had patched up their back court with two good draft purchases, Corky Devlin and Chuck Noble, who were prime assets in the Pistons' division title run.

Philadelphia clinched the Eastern crown March 7th. A day later the Pistons won the Western title with a 100-82 win over the Lakers. The biggest scramble was for playoff spots in the Western Division. St. Louis and Minneapolis finally tied with 33-39 records; Rochester fell two games short and was out of the playoffs for the first time in their history.

There were tie-breakers in both divisions. Syracuse beat New York 82-77 to get third place in the East and Minneapolis earned the home court advantage with a 103-97 victory over St. Louis in the west. It was an unusual season with only three clubs finishing over .500: Philadelphia 45-27, Boston 39-33, and Fort Wayne 37-35. The Pistons, having started slowly, were six games back of their 1954-55 pace.

The division semifinals went to Syracuse over Boston and St. Louis over Minneapolis. Neither of the teams won at home in the two-out-of-three series. That set up the Hawks against Fort Wayne in a best-of-five playoff for the Western Division title and a spot in the World Series.

Even though Hutchins held Pettit to seven points, St. Louis won the opener 86-85 before 3491 disappointed fans. The series moved to St. Louis for a national television date and the Hawks went two up with a 84-74 win. Yardley had twenty-three in the opener while Foust had sixteen in the second game loss.

Fort Wayne got back in it 107-84 in a Sunday matinee as 4800 cheered. The series moved back to St. Louis March 26th and the Z's won this roadie 93-84. Yardley continued to be the Pistons' offensive star, and Hutchins was still paralyzing the league's best scorer, Pettit.

Dick Shippy, writing for the *Journal-Gazette*, called the back-to-the-wall win at St. Louis "the greatest, the mostest and the bestest."

The finale in Fort Wayne on March 29th packed the rafters with 9261 fans. Only the 1953 NBA All-Star game, with special seating arrangements, outdrew this one. The Pistons won the division crown 102-97, and moved into the World Series against Philadelphia, a three-of-five winner over Syracuse.

Fort Wayne established a NBA record of being the only team to win a five-game playoff series after losing the first two games. It still stands.

Opening game of the championship series was set for another nationally televised Saturday afternoon date in Philadelphia. Things looked good for the Pistons when they spurted seventeen points ahead in the second quarter but Philadelphia's great offensive power finally wore them down 98-94. Yardley continued to sizzle with twenty-seven points.

The following Sunday matinee was another barnburner with Fort Wayne evening the set 84-83. Yardley's thirty bettered Arizin's twenty-seven. The turnstiles spun another huge crowd, 6957.

More than 11,000 turned out in Philly for the third game, which the Warriors won, 100-96. A sluggish third quarter and Arizin's twenty-seven points spelled the doom. The series returned to Fort Wayne where Philadelphia had never won a game in the Memorial Coliseum, the same jinx Fort Wayne had in Syracuse.

Philadelphia broke the jinx, taking a 3-1 series lead with a 107-105 win before 7852 fired-up patrons. Arizin continued his spectacular

series with thirty points. A Corky Devlin basket at the end of the game barely missed the buzzer.

Philadelphia clinched the world championship in convincing fashion 99-88. Unheralded Joe Graboski poured in twenty-nine points, giving the Warrior forwards fifty-five points with Arizin adding twenty-six. Yardley sparked again with thirty points, but the Pistons were runners-up for the second straight year.

"We must build our club to meet the challenge of this Philadelphia power and all of the NBA clubs," chorused both owner Fred Zollner and coach Eckman after the loss.

Surprisingly, none of the Pistons made the NBA All-Star teams. Pettit was the top vote getter. Other first team selections were Arizin and Johnston, Philadelphia; and Bob Cousy and Bill Sharman of the Celtics. Second-team honors went to Dolph Schayes, Syracuse; Maurice Stokes, Rochester (who was also Rookie of the Year); Clyde Lovellette and Slater Martin, Minneapolis; and Jack George, Philadelphia.

Chuck Cooper was given his outright release. Eckman went to Chicago to referee the College All-Star—Harlem Globetrotters game, and the Pistons awaited the 1956-57 season, which would start with the NBA's college draft.

Yardley was the Pistons' leading scorer with 1233 points (17.4 average). Foust, who had been the team's leading scorer for the past five years, had 1166 points for a 16.2 average. Including the playoffs, Fort Wayne finished the NBA season at 41-41.

Before departing for their off-season haunts, Houbregs and Odie Spears became the first to sign their 1956-57 contracts.

1956-57

The basketball pendulum finally had swung back East. Although Syracuse, a year earlier, was in the Eastern Division, the team was considered more 'western' because of a previous National Basketball League affiliation. The Nationals' 4-3 win over the Pistons had continued the string of former NBL teams dominating the championships of the NBA.

Philadelphia's lacing of the Pistons was convincing evidence that the old Basketball Association of America forerunners had caught up with the NBL. When Fort Wayne, Minneapolis, Indianapolis, and Rochester

jumped from the NBL to form the NBA with BAA survivors, it was on the basis that the NBL had the big time players and the BAA had the big time arenas.

The addition of Tom Gola to the high-powered offense generated by Paul Arizin and Neil Johnston had given Coach George Senesky the combination that now was considered one of the greatest clubs in pro history. The Pistons did not seem as frantic in their loss to the Warriors as they were in the controversial defeat by Syracuse a year earlier.

The Zollner monthly employee magazine, *The Rocket*, wrapped up the season with an eight paragraph story headlined "The Big One Got Away Again." "The big one got away again, but the Pistons already are formulating plans to see that it doesn't happen a third time... A summing up for the 1955-56 season can only be a pleasant one. The Z's attendance increased sharply and tremendous interest in the playoff games (more than 24,000 saw the last three games at home) pointed toward another increase next season."

The college draft pool was shallow. Boston's coach Red Auerbach became an instant genius when he got three of the plums. Fort Wayne picked sixth and took DePaul's Ron Sobieszcyk, but immediately traded him to New York for Gene Shue, a two-year veteran who had played college ball at Maryland.

Eckman's trade of Ron Sobie turned in Fort Wayne's favor. Sobie wound up with a decent four-year career, but Shue became one of the bigger stars, lasting six of his ten-year career in the Piston organization. He became one of the NBA's more successful coaches.

Rochester, last in the standings, made Sihugo Green of Duquesne the number one pick. St. Louis selected Bill Russell, who had led San Francisco to two NCAA championships and fifty-five consecutive collegiate wins.

In the prearranged deal, Russell went to Boston for Cliff Hagan and Easy Ed Macauley, who was happy to return hom where he had starred for St. Louis University. The Celtics then added Russell's teammate, K. C. Jones, and already had selected Holy Cross' Tom Heinsohn as their territorial draft.

Neither Russell nor Jones would be available until December because of the Olympics in Australia in November, but it was worth the wait. It took a \$25,000 signing bonus to keep Russell away from the Globetrotters.

St. Louis plucked Willie Naulls of UCLA. Other Piston draftees were Bob Kessler, Maryland; Bill Thieban, Hofstra; Charley Slack,

Marshall; Joe Leiber, Holy Cross; John Schlimm and Harris, Tennessee Tech. The last was chosen on the recommendation of Johnny Oldham, a former Piston star who was now his college coach.

The draft pool was so skimpy that it lasted only seven rounds. There would be bigger and better drafts ahead.

With so little activity from the college draft, a lot of interclub trading was in the offing. Eckman had a delicate choice when George Mikan, now general manager of the Lakers, offered Vern Mikkelsen and Slater Martin for Mel Hutchins.

After releasing Cooper, Eckman had said Andy Phillip did not figure in his plans since Dick Rosenthal was coming back from the service. Phillip retired, but was called by the Celtics. He spent two years with them, then became a probation officer in California.

The league meeting, in conjunction with the draft, turned down a serious franchise application from Washington, feeling that a nine-team circuit would be unbalanced. The NBA stood pat with its eight teams and a 72-game schedule. Boston was awarded the All-Star game on January 15th.

Cal Christensen, former Toledo University star and four-year NBA veteran, asked for a tryout. Frank Brian confirmed his retirement.

The Piston front office was optimistic and predicted a new attendance record for the season with 1700 season tickets sold by early September. Then the Z's dropped a bombshell on the community with a new radio policy: no home games would be broadcast and twenty-five to thirty-three of the road games would be heard over WOWO, Fort Wayne's 50,000 watt station. Hilliard Gates, at WKJG, had done the home and road telecasts throughout all the Piston years and was widely known as the "voice of the Pistons." He was practically one of the family, sharing player and management confidants.

"We never considered radio as a revenue until WOWO came up with this offer. Boston had a similar policy in television, telecasting road games but no home games. The offer surprised us, and we couldn't turn it down," business manager Phil Olofson said later.

The official Zollner announcement stated, "The Pistons' association with WKJG and Hilliard Gates, one of the nation's finest basketball announcers, has been an enjoyable experience, one which, we are confident, has been beneficial for all parties concerned.

"However, expansion of the Piston radio audience, and the 'saturation' schedule of radio broadcasts, must take precedence as part of a new



Piston coach Charley Eckman, broadcaster Hilliard Gates, Voice of the Pistons, and team owner and sponsor Fred Zollner. They are reviewing a story concerning the Pistons in Sports Illustrated magazine.

radio policy which the Pistons believe is more in keeping with our current needs."

Fred Smith, a former color analyst for Gates, would do the play-by-play. The change in broadcast policy may have backfired in not showing the Pistons in their best light. Fort Wayne wound up as the second worst team on the road, winning only seven of thirty-one on foreign courts and twenty-three of thirty-one at home. They were 4-6 on neutral courts.

The transformation cycle was nearly complete. Even the Knot Hole Gang, which kept Zollner Stadium busy in the summer, switched from softball to baseball.

Fort Wayne's pre-season plans included opening practice October 1st, four exhibition games against the St. Louis Hawks, and several intra-squad skirmishes in surrounding towns. The official NBA season would open in Rochester on October 27th. The home opener at Memorial Coliseum against Minneapolis would be the following night.

The Z's bought the contract of Bill Kenville from Syracuse to bolster the back court. The four-game exhibition schedule was an abrupt change from last year's tiring fifteen-game exhibition, which Eckman said, "just made us tired."

Don Bielke, Bob Mays, and Joe Liebler were the first cuts. When the Z's played their first intra-squad game at Dunkirk, Eckman had fifteen players on the roster: Houbregs, Christensen, Corky Devlin, Chuck Noble, Bill Bales, Fritz Schultz (Fort Wayne South Side and Tulane), Bob Yardley (George's younger brother) and Dan Moran. Hutchins was still on the West Coast, awaiting the birth of a baby.

After the first exhibition loss to St. Louis, 119-100, at Auburn, the squad was cut to eleven. Released were Bales, Bob Yardley, Atha, Christensen, Moran and Schultz.

The players knew that it was inevitable that their teammates would come and go. "Every team I played with had a bond between the players," Frank Brian said, "When somebody was traded, it hurt." They had to make the best of the tough facts of life. "I was there to do a job, so you worried more about doing that job."

Eight-year veteran Alex Hannum checked in for a tryout. He chipped in five points at Bluffton the next night when the Z's won 104-92.

Next move for the Pistons was buying the contract of nine-year veteran Ephraim (Red) Rocha from Syracuse, which Eckman described as 'pennant insurance.' A ruptured disc put Houbregs on the injured reserve list for five games.

Eckman started the season opener at Rochester with Yardley, Hutchins, Foust and the new guard combination of Kenville and Shue. The Pistons lost 88-85. Rocha managed twelve points as Eckman used all eleven players. In the Coliseum opener the following night Fort Wayne beat Minneapolis 94-88. Yardley's 27, Foust's 24, and Shue's 18 led the way. After losing the next two, 116-81 at Philadelphia and New York at home 96-88, the Pistons put Odie Spears out on waivers and brought Houbregs back off the injured reserve list.

A home split with St. Louis left the Pistons at 2-4 and they were the trailers in the Western Division. In November the Pistons were still last in a tightly bunched race. Their 8-10 record was only two games back of Rochester's 11-9 mark while Boston sailed away in the East with a nine-game winning streak (13-3). Bill Russell had not reported back from the Olympics yet. Fort Wayne broke the Syracuse floor jinx November 29th, winning 92-87, the first win over the Nats in Syracuse since 1948 in the old National Basketball League. A slow start by Syracuse cost Al Cervi his coaching job. He was replaced by Paul Seymour November 25th.

Bill Thieben, the only rookie to make the roster, was optioned out on December 1, but kept under contract as the NBA ten-player limit came into effect.

The Pistons went head to head with Rochester at the Memorial Coliseum and had a chance to take over the Western Division lead December 9th but faltered in a 101-100 overtime thriller. It was a bigger disappointment when only 3006 fans showed up. When Boston overwhelmed the Z's two nights later, 113-97, Fort Wayne fell two and one half games off the pace.

Off-court action was starting to heat up. Slater Martin, who had been traded to New York for Walt Dukes, was re-traded to St. Louis for Willie Naulls. Russell, back from the Olympics, turned down a \$30,000 offer to give Boston its much-needed defensive backbone.

On the home front, Eckman stirred up speculation again about moving the Fort Wayne franchise. In a speech in Indianapolis December 13th, Eckman said, "There is a good chance the club may be relocated in another city by next season." It was the first public hint that had surfaced since the end of the 1955-56 season.

Zollner quickly denied any commitment to move the team: "Professional basketball has arrived as a big time sport. Metropolitan thinking is that three franchises in the National Basketball Association, including Fort Wayne, should be transferred to larger cities.

"We have made no commitments and sincerely hope that the loyal fans in this area through their interest and attendance will help us keep Fort Wayne on the map to occupy the same position in professional basketball that Green Bay does in professional football."

The Pistons placed Alex Hannum on waivers and put Thieben on the active list for the following Sunday game against New York. Fort Wayne won 84-80 but the attendance of 3100 was an unfortunate answer to the appeal for more fan support.

The NBA was having a hard time getting away from the bush-league label. New York columnist Milt Gross had used the term in connection with the ill-advised round-robin playoffs three seasons back and referee John Nucatola had been critical of the league when the front office did not back up its officials.

Eckman complained about the cross-country jumps on consecutive nights. Eddie Gottlieb, long-time schedule maker, seemed to penalize the Fort Wayne club because they had the luxury of their own aircraft. The Z's usually travelled more miles than any other franchise.

Bill Russell had led the United States to the Olympic gold medal in basketball. His appearance jump-started the turnstiles all around the league. His initial appearance in Fort Wayne was December 23 when Fort Wayne set a single-game attendance record of 8108 fans. The Zollners whipped the Celtics, 95-87. Rookie Bill Theiben had his best night with 17 points, behind Yardley's leading 22, while Russell was held to five. Two nights later in a Madison Square Garden appearance, Russell wowed the crowd of 18,036 even though Boston lost again 89-82 to Philadelphia. He kept perennial NBA scoring champ Neil Johnston pointless for 40 minutes and grabbed 18 rebounds.

Eckman lost his All-Star coaching job to Rochester's Bobby Wanzer when the Royals had a half game edge over Fort Wayne in the Western Division standings by January 1, the determinant date for All-Star coaching honors. Red Auerbach was the East coach, with a four-game Boston lead over Philadelphia.

Dick Rosenthal returned from the service and joined the team immediately. Because of his military status, the Pistons were allowed 11 men for 30 days. It came at an appropriate time, with Larry Foust out with a back problem. Rosenthal chipped in with seven points in his debut and helped Fort Wayne overcome a 21-point deficit in beating Minneapolis, 104-102 on January 2. Yardley had 33 points before a disappointing crowd of 2730, the lowest of the season.

The Zollners finally got to first place January 5 with a 109-96 stomping of the New York Knicks. The nationally-televised game from Memorial Coliseum attracted 4360 fans. The lead was short-lived as the Z's lost to Boston, and Rochester beat St. Louis in Sunday games. Rochester was back on top by a half-game.

Yardley and Hutchins were named to the Western Division All-Star team with Maurice Stokes, Richie Regan and Jack Twyman, of Rochester; Ed Macauley, Bob Pettit and Slater Martin, St. Louis; and Clyde Lovellette and Dick Garmaker, Minneapolis.

If there was a chance that the Pistons were going to move from Fort Wayne, Fred Zollner guarded the secret like an application for a piston patent.

Rumors surfaced January 10 in the *News-Sentinel's* Ben Tenny column. Maurice Podoloff, president of the NBA said: "I have never heard any sentiment at all among the Board of Governors of the NBA about Fort Wayne being asked to drop out to make way for a larger city....

Fred Zollner has been of much help in recent years in making the league stronger and he can have a franchise in Fort Wayne for as long as he wants to have one. How long that will be only he can decide."

Bill Russell came back to town for his second appearance and with the Z's fighting for first place, Boston whipped Fort Wayne, 98-81. Russell grabbed 23 rebounds, scored 15 points and blocked several shots in 43 minutes of action. A weeknight crowd of 4265 showed up.

Two days later the *Journal-Gazette*²⁸ headlined: "Zollner Piston officials 'explore' Detroit as possible site for team". In previous speculation only Louisville and Milwaukee had been mentioned.

Otto Adams, company treasurer, and R. J. Roshirt, Zollner assistant from Detroit, looked at Olympia Stadium and the University of Detroit Fieldhouse. Adams said, "We are no different from several other NBA cities — Minneapolis, Rochester and Syracuse — which are looking around for future sites because present attendance suggests such action."

The Pistons, in 15 home dates, had attracted 61,600 patrons, an average of 4106 per game. Fort Wayne was still the bargain basement attraction in the league, with a \$2.50 top on their ticket prices.

The Zollners finally got back in the West lead by the All-Star break. The standings, as of January 15 were:

²⁸ January 12, 1957.

Eastern Division

	W	L
Boston	23	14
Philadelphia	21	18
New York	19	18
Syracuse	15	20

Western Division

Fort Wayne	19	18
Rochester	20	20
Minneapolis	18	21
St. Louis	15	21

The East beat the West 107-97 before 11,178 in Boston Garden, but the biggest trade coming out of the All-Star game seemed to be Fort Wayne's Memorial Coliseum for Detroit's Olympia Stadium. The move seemed imminent when Podoloff gave his blessing to the move. Fred Zollner said: "Basketball has grown so fast that we feel it is now a metropolitan attraction. We considered Louisville but decided negatively. We now are studying the possibility of moving to Detroit and so far everything is very favorable. We should know by March."

Zollner emphasized that attendance the rest of the season would not influence his decision. He did not want to pressure the Fort Wayne fans at all. The *News-Sentinel*²⁹ reported: "It was indicated that if the move is negotiated, the Pistons will still play seven games, one with each other league member, at the Memorial Coliseum. If nothing else, this might prevent any other team such as Rochester or Minneapolis from moving its franchise to Fort Wayne."

Zollner's remarks from Boston concluded: "Fort Wayne is a wonderful city. However, I feel a club can do better in a metropolitan area of two million people than an area of 200,000."

The Piston basketball club, not knowing whether or not they were orphans, dropped a couple of road games to New York and Syracuse, and nearly lost first place. When they came home on January 22 against St. Louis, it would be their first home appearance since the Detroit speculation arose. The Z's had a \$1 sale (all tickets) but only attracted

²⁹ January 16, 1957, p.28.

2315 fans, the smallest home turnout of the year. The Pistons won 97-87 and held on to a one-game lead over Minneapolis and Rochester.

Fort Wayne came home for a national television date against Philadelphia. 4237 turned out to watch George Yardley's 32 points spark the Z's to a 101-98 win. The next afternoon, still at home, the Pistons nosed the New York Knicks 103-102 and Yardley, well on his way to a season scoring record, had 26. Rosenthal's furlough was up and Eckman tried to trade him to Minneapolis for Dick Schnittker. When Minneapolis nixed the deal, the Pistons farmed out Rosenthal's contract.

At the end of January, Fort Wayne led St. Louis by two games, Minneapolis by four and Rochester by four and a half. Yardley's 20.4 per game scoring average was seventh best in the league. Bob Pettit of St. Louis, was the leader with his 27.6 average.

Negotiations with Detroit's Olympia Stadium continued and Zollner set February 11 as the final date for a decision. Quoted in the *Detroit Free Press*, the Piston owner said: "If it was a 50-50 bet that we would bring pro basketball to Detroit when we opened business negotiations, it is a 75-25 proposition now."

Cincinnati applied for a franchise, and Fort Wayne and Rochester played a game there to test the waters. More than 6300 fans turned out to watch the Royals beat Fort Wayne 96-80.

With the exception of a brief one-day tie in early February, the Pistons enjoyed first place for a month. St. Louis and Fort Wayne had identical 24-25 records as of February 4. The Hawks collared them March 8 at 32-36 and took over first in an all-Western Division double-header at Memorial Coliseum when St. Louis beat Rochester and the Zollners were edged by Minneapolis 101-97. Ex-Piston Charlie Share had one of his best nights as a pro, getting 30 of the St. Louis points while Yardley piled in 31 more points for the Z's. All the hubbub about moving to Detroit apparently had taken the zing out of the Z's. In the next-to-last game of the regular season, Fort Wayne clinched its playoff berth by beating Rochester 100-96, but the second lowest crowd of the season (2358) was little help to the Zollners' morale.

The Western Division wound up in a three-way tie, necessitating a one-game round-robin playoff. Fort Wayne was pushed into third place by losing at St. Louis 115-103, and would meet the loser of the Hawk-Laker game in a two-of-three playoff for survival in the playoff series.

St. Louis beat Minneapolis, placing the Lakers and Pistons together for the Division semi-finals, which were best two of three. In a free-scoring fray before only 1467 fans the home court Lakers went one-

up 141-137 as George Yardley continued his sensational scoring with 34 points.

In what proved to be the final NBA game for the Fort Wayne franchise at Memorial Coliseum on March 19, 1957, the Z's put on a dazzler but only 2212 fans showed up for it. The Lakers edged the Zollners 110-108 with a rebound basket by Clyde Lovellette and a free throw by Dick Schnittker in the last 10 seconds sealing the win. The Lakers thus moved to the Western finals against St. Louis and Fort Wayne had no place to go except to Detroit. Larry Foust had the distinction of scoring the last Piston basket in Fort Wayne as part of his 30 point contribution.

The pendulum swing to the Eastern Division was never more evident. All four Eastern Division teams had better records than the three-way tie for first in the West:

Eastern Division

	W	L
Boston	44	28
Syracuse	38	34
Philadelphia	37	35
New York	36	36

Western Division

St. Louis	34	38
Fort Wayne	34	38
Minneapolis	34	38
Rochester	31	41

Fort Wayne's love affair with Fred Zollner's basketball team broke up February 14, 1957. To the die-hard fans it was a funny Valentine. To Zollner and the NBA it was a practical business decision that was necessary if the Zollner Pistons were to keep pace in a league that was becoming more metropolitan with each passing season.

In a brief press conference in Detroit, Zollner announced that he had signed a six-year contract to play 22 nights a year at Olympia Stadium. He also named Otto Adams, treasurer for the Zollner Corporation, as his general manager and handed Charlie Eckman a three-year contract as coach.

"It's not so much that we're unhappy and unwanted in Fort Wayne. We're simply moving to the market," Zollner explained. "But it's just like moving across the street. I believe a major sport must be located in an area of more than a million population. In Fort Wayne, we have the highest per capita attendance in the league. But it's not enough....

"Let's say that we have been division champions for two years and are now leading the league and still we have 6,000 empty seats. What would happen if we were trailing?"³⁰

Zollner said Adams, as general manager, would not be based in Detroit full time, but would be doing a great deal of commuting. Other personnel from Detroit and Fort Wayne would be named later. The Detroit office was scheduled to open April 1.

When Fred's veil of secrecy was lifted, he laid all his cards on the table. Backstage, Zollner had orchestrated the plan for a long time and, in some measure, had stunned the town again just as he had done with his announcement three years before when he named the referee as his coach.

Zollner, who often operated on a handshake, thought it was the gentlemanly and decent thing to do to tell the public his plans. He had the option of taking a few of the remaining games, even the playoffs, to Detroit for a test run, but fulfilled his commitments to Fort Wayne fans and Memorial Coliseum to play out the string there.

The decision to go public was a nightmare for the business office. They used every gimmick they could think of to help fill the seats.

Ben Tenny wrote in the *News-Sentinel*: "The ones who are sore are venting their feelings in no uncertain terms. Around some, it's not popular right now to even mention the names of Zollner, Eckman or others connected with the move.

"At the risk of having some of that ire directed my way, I would like to point out, however, that the industrialist who is ending the long era of athletic promotions here, does not deserve only condemnation at this time. It was his right to call it quits here any time he so chose, though most of us had thought he would do so only when he tired of being a pro team sponsor.

"What also should be remembered are these facts: He did give Fort Wayne a lot of entertainment, a lot of valuable publicity, through the sponsorships of softball and basketball....

"On top of that, it might be pointed out that thousands of dollars have been used to give hundreds of Fort Wayne youngsters pleasant hours

³⁰ *News-Sentinel*, 14 February 1957, p.14.

in swimming, skating and playing through the extensive Knot Hole Gang setup the organization has sponsored. That alone deserves the city's thanks. Chances are those projects long will be part of his program here, even though he has decided to try to be 'big time' in a 'big city' in his basketball venture."³¹

Detroit's pro basketball history was worrisome. Ten years before, Olympia Stadium had had a direct tie-in with the Detroit Falcons of the old Basketball Association of America. The team finished last, folded, and lost \$50,000. That same season the Detroit Gems were in the old National Basketball League, lost 40 straight games, folded, and lost \$30,000.

Detroit Free Press columnist Tommy Devine offered: "If Fred Zollner does move here, he had better come in with both his eyes and his purse wide open."³²

The most comprehensive statement of the entire move came in *The Rocket*, the Zollner Corporation's employee magazine³³ :

"Fred Zollner recently announced that next season the Pistons will operate as the Detroit Pistons, playing most of their home games at the Olympia Stadium in that city. He further stated that the franchise was being transferred with regrets, due to the friendship and loyalty of the local fans, but the move was necessary in order to successfully compete with teams from the larger cities of the Nation.

"The Pistons are already receiving a warm welcome from the sports fans of Detroit, and the press, television and radio representatives are happy to have the National Basketball Association franchise in their city.

"Detroit has long been one of America's great sports centers and the Detroit Pistons will round out a program of having a pennant contender in professional basketball to go along with the Detroit Tigers, Detroit Lions and Detroit Red Wings.

"We have received personal best wishes from the management of these three Detroit Major League Sports activities, who stated that our addition to the sports program is very desirable in that it makes their city one of the few that has Major League sports in baseball, football, hockey and basketball.

³¹ February 16, 1957, p.12.

³² quoted in Ben Tenny's column, *News-Sentinel*, 29 January 1957, p.14.

³³ March 1957.

"Professional basketball as played in the National Basketball Association is now recognized as a major league sport and has received public acceptance and support throughout the country. The game-of-the-week is carried on NBC over 140 television stations; national magazines are carrying weekly articles and capacity crowds attend the games in Metropolitan areas.

"In addition to being able to compete more successfully with teams from the larger cities, moving the franchise to Detroit will place our name and the activity in the center of the automotive world, which should be beneficial in promoting the use of our manufactured products by leading passenger car and truck companies.

"The Piston management sincerely hopes that arrangements can be worked out to play a few regularly scheduled contests in Fort Wayne, and the Detroit ticket office will be instructed to provide the best available tickets to attend games in Detroit for all Fort Wayne people visiting that city for business or pleasure.

"Please note that the change involves only the Piston professional basketball team and does not affect in any way the Knot Hole Gang, ice shows and other activities which Fred Zollner sponsors. All employees will continue to have the same privileges on these attractions."

While the uniform makers were changing the lettering on Piston shirts to Detroit, St. Louis and Boston hooked up in a blistering final playoff for the NBA Championship. The Hawks had mowed down Minneapolis in three straight for the Western crown. Boston did the same thing to Syracuse in the East.

The finals went the full seven games and the decider was a double overtime 125-123 white-knuckle Boston win.

Les Harrison moved his Rochester Franchise to Cincinnati and the NBA stayed at eight teams.

Yardley speculated that it was league pressure that finally determined the move to Detroit. The other teams did not enjoy travelling to Fort Wayne, which was off the beaten track, and hotel accommodations here were not to the standard they found elsewhere.

Hughie Johnston, who may have had a closer personal relationship with Fred than any of his other athletes, said that the Memorial Coliseum management had taken some of the basketball dates and replaced them with hockey, which was growing in popularity. This may have caused the Piston management some concerns about their future at the arena.

For the players themselves, the move offered a great change in their way of life. George Yardley said of Detroit, "It was the worst place to play." Their new home court did not compare to the state-of-the-art Memorial Coliseum and there was little initial fan support. The early games were poorly attended.

But even more was the fact that some of the players had come to see Fort Wayne as home. Yardley described it as "a fantastic city that took you to heart, made you feel you were one of them." He and his wife Diana had grown up in California and returned to live there later, but they found their Christmas card list was packed with Fort Wayne addresses, and they still return here once every year for the Mad Anthony tournament and to renew old acquaintances.

Many hard-core fans were blaming Eckman for stirring up the move to Detroit, particularly after a Ben Tenny column which said, "Charley, by the way, still won't take any of the Detroit move blame in talking to the writer and others around our fair city which is a far cry from the attitude when he's away from here. He was overheard on the Z's last trip to Philadelphia to tell NBA prexy Maurice Podoloff, 'You can give me 95 percent of the credit for that move to Detroit.'"

So there were a lot of dry eyes in Fort Wayne when Eckman lasted just 25 games in Detroit. The team stood at 9-16.

Referee Norm Drucker described Charley Eckman's last day with the Pistons, saying that Charley told how Zollner called him into a meeting.. He said he was going to make a change in his department. Charley realized with a start that he was the only one in his department.³⁴

The restless, ambitious Zollner replaced him with Red Rocha, who steered the Z's into the playoffs. Their 33-39 record tied Cincinnati. Fort Wayne favorite George Yardley became the first NBA player in history to score more than 2000 points in a season, and became the first Piston to win the league scoring championship.

The league had come a long way in the few years since it was founded. With the new television audience, the stars were recognizable to everyone. They played in big arenas to ever-larger crowds. Basketball was truly major league.

The curtain dropped on Fort Wayne Zollner Piston basketball — from the YMCA to the NBA, every major league step of the way.

³⁴ quoted in Terry Pluto, *Tall Tales* (1992), p.43.

The Knot Hole Gang

One of Fred Zollner's finest legacies in Fort Wayne still lives on. The Knot Hole Gang was established in 1948, the second season at Zollner Stadium, and was wrapped up in 1957 when the athletic offices moved to Detroit.

The objective of the Knot Hole Gang was to stimulate interest both in the Zollner Pistons and the game of softball. Zollner envisioned a major league of softball, with industrial sponsorship, equivalent to major league baseball.

All the grade school children in Fort Wayne were eligible. To enable everyone to have access to the cards, they were distributed through the public and parochial school systems. The students were issued a membership card which gave them the chance to attend at least one Piston game a week without charge. Attendance prizes of sports equipment were given on Knot Hole nights, and grand prizes of sports equipment and games were offered on the last Knot Hole night of the season. Lloyd Hyde won an erector set at one half-time draw, which delighted his family for years.

It was natural that the children had a favorite player. Asked who hers was, Mary Ellen Johnston answered immediately, "Elmer Rohrs. But don't ask me why!"

The first year showed 9987 members. Merle J. Abbett, the superintendent of the Fort Wayne schools, observed, "Thousands of boys and girls have been stimulated by this activity and encouraged toward healthy living. It has been successful in every respect and a genuine public service."

Buoyed by the reception of the first year, the Pistons expanded the membership into all of Allen County in 1949 and the membership jumped to 14,000. Lawrence E. Foote, superintendent of the county schools, noted: "Among the proudest possessions of the boys and girls of Allen County are the cards which signify membership in an organization devoted exclusively to them — the Zollner Piston Knot Hole Gang. The year-round activities sponsored by Fred Zollner make a real contribution to the welfare of our small children."

In 1950, a new city administration was elected, and among the changes they considered was a charge to youngsters who swam at the cities three municipal pools, Swinney, Memorial and McMillen. Fred Zollner took exception to charging kids and worked out an arrangement

with the Board of Park Commissioners to pay a fee for all the Knot Hole Gang members.

Many of the children swam every day in the municipal pools. The city was much smaller and everyone could walk or bike to the pool of their choice, meet their friends and spend most of the day.

Most children did not have funds to spend on amusing themselves. If they could swim in the daytime, and then bike to the stadium to watch a softball game, it was a full life.

22,400 cards were issued in 1950 and Fred's kids enjoyed 57,000 free swims.

In 1951, membership jumped another thousand when the Pistons started the Knot Hole softball leagues. There were two divisions, the Red and the Blue, one for boys under ten and the other for ages eleven to fourteen.

The players were given a free T-shirt and baseball hat. This followed a Zollner tradition, for even before he founded the Knot Hole Gang, Fred had assisted boys who organized their own softball league by supplying shirts and hats through Sappenfield's sporting goods store.

Zollner used his players as coaches and instructors. The teams were named after Piston players. Later, the divisions were named after leading pro baseball teams. The coaches thrilled the boys by demonstrating how the Pistons played the game. Every boy who applied was assigned to a team, and everyone on a team got to play in every game. There were no benchwarmers in the Knot Hole Gang League. The motto was "Everybody Plays." Four hundred boys participated in the first year. Some of the administrative work was done by Charlie Share, who was sidelined from his basketball career for half a year.

Charlie enjoyed paying visits to the schools as part of his job. Since he was so tall, he would pick out "the smallest kid I could find," and put his sports jacket on him. He also invited questions from his audience. One little boy asked if really was six foot ten and weighed 270 pounds. Charlie said yes. "Then," the little lad continued, "What size shoe do you take?"

"Fifteen," said Charlie.

"Fifteen!" the boy remarked to his neighbor, "I could take two steps in that!"

Membership continued to grow: 25,000 in 1952, 27,000 in 1953 and 31,000 in 1954. There were 87,474 free swims.

There were Knot Hole nights for Piston basketball games at Memorial Coliseum. In the winter, skating parties were arranged, overseen by



A group of trophy-winning Zoller Knot Hole Gang members. Advisors standing in back row are Bob Baker, left, and Tom Lallak, right.

Bernie Kampschmidt, Jim Ramage and Ed Robitaille. Lois Williams, who had skated with Holiday on Ice, was the skating instructor. More than 5100 children enjoyed the skating. To make the Coliseum accessible to everyone, Rogers Friendly Markets and the transit system combined to provide free transportation.

When the Piston softball team was broken up in 1954, Fred Zollner gave up his softball dream. He even switched to baseball for the Knot Hole League players in the 1956 season.

This meant more equipment. To the T-shirt and cap, the players added baseball bats, balls, helmets and catchers' riggings.

Baseball showed its popularity immediately, jumping from 324 in 1956 to over 600 in 1957. Bernie Kampschmidt, Jim Ramage, Terry Coonan and Tom Lallak were the supervisors. There were three divisions: Midgets (6-8 years); Intermediates (9-11) and Seniors (12-14). They operated on a ten-game schedule, lasting for seven innings or one hour, whichever came first. They were guaranteed to play at least one night game a week at Zollner Stadium.

The Knot Hole Gang hit a home run in its last at bat, going out in grand style. Membership had peaked at 35,000, and there were more than 100,000 free swims in the last season, 1957. The final Knot Hole activities were the ice skating sessions in the 1957-58 season.

As the curtain came down, Fort Wayne's mayor, Robert E. Meyers, said, "Many thousands of boys and girls in Fort Wayne and Allen County have reaped rich benefits from the free program of activities designed and sponsored for them by Fred Zollner. The lessons in good citizenship and sportsmanship which the Zollner Piston Knot Hole Gang has taught have value beyond estimation."

Dr. David Bleeke recalls with pride playing under the coaching of Dick Szymanski, reserve catcher, and cherishes his small Zollner Piston flag and an autographed softball.

Don Weber played on a championship team in the Knot Hole Gang league. His brother Dick was six years younger and had to accompany him everywhere he went. He would take Dick to the games with him, seat him in the bleachers and tell him not to move, he would return to pick him up after the game.

During the game, Don was rounding the bases, collided with the third baseman and sustained a charley horse. He was in a lot of pain and could not walk. Some adults carried him into the dressing room, where the Pistons' trainers took care of him, spraying his leg with something

which made it feel icy. He remained there for the rest of the game and forgot about Dick.

Only later, when the game ended, an usher found Dick weeping in the stands because he did not know what had happened to his brother.

Jerry Snyder remembers the fun, but also that, once the boys reached the stadium, "we never had any money. You could smell the popcorn, corn dogs and everything, and be starved to death till you got home."

Virginia Simone Wyman served on the safety patrol at St. Patrick's school. For their services, she and other patrollers were taken to a special appreciation day at Zollner Stadium in 1951. She remembers there were hot dogs and games. She laughingly adds an afterthought, "And softball too. It's the hot dogs I remember."

The Knot Hole Gang membership card was a cherished item to the children of Fort Wayne forty-five years ago. Oddly enough, not many of them have survived. Chuck Suder explained that most children wore only their bathing suits and carried a towel to the pool. The only place for the card was in the sole of their shoe, where it would quickly show signs of wear.

The deep impression made by the Knot Hole Gang is still evident today, in Dale McMillen's Wildcat Baseball League, one of the Summit City's favorite summertime diversions for the youngsters.

The Wildcatters picked up on Zollner's "Everybody Plays" theme, which means that every player, regardless of size, age or ability, gets to make an appearance in every game.

Mr. Z's Knot Hole Gang started it, and Mr. Mac's Wildcat League carries it on in perpetuity.

Fred Zollner: The Afterglow

This is a more personal comment.

After chronicling the story of the Zollner Pistons through its seventeen years of major league history, my memory bank overflows. The story will not be over until Fred Zollner's name is put on a plaque in the Basketball Hall of Fame.

His credentials for election to the Hall of Fame are impeccable. Every move he made was for the good of the game, rules and organization.

The historic 19-18 win over the Minnesota Lakers in 1950 not only stands in the National Basketball Association record books as the lowest scoring game, but was the precursor of the 24-second shot clock, considering by some the most valuable rule change in the history of the sport.

Zollner and his top aide, Carl Bennett, pushed for the six fouls per team per quarter rule. Early on, Bennett and coach Murray Mendenhall played experimental games in practice with twelve-foot and fifteen-foot foul lanes to open up play under the basket and take the height advantage away from the tall players. These rules were eventually altered and are still effective in the game today.

Zollner was a missionary. He pioneered pro basketball in Canada and Florida. Pro ball was not yet in full bloom and the big city franchises were struggling. He also considered an exhibition game in Havana, Cuba.

Zollner's record in pro basketball was one of persistence and patience. He stayed the course during the infancy of the National Basketball League, and helped bankroll the sport when it fell to four teams in the 1942-43 season.

His teams have played straight through the league seasons ever since, collaborating with the Basketball Association of America in a four-team jump from the National League in 1948-49, and completing the merger of the remaining National League teams to form the National Basketball Association in 1949-50. Fred's performance bond check was the first to reach the NBA, making Fort Wayne the first member of the league.

Zollner himself assumed a seat on the NBA board of governors in 1954-55. He remained financially generous to the other teams in the league, some of whom were helped in troubled times. Andy Phillip has suggested that the motive behind his own purchase from Philadelphia was, at least in part, to bolster the tottering Warrior finances.

From my perspective, the three most gut-wrenching decisions Zollner had to make in Fort Wayne were the dismissal of Bobby McDermott, the firing of Jack Molinas in a gambling scandal and the startling surprise hiring of Charley Eckman as coach.

Player-coach McDermott was one of Fred's favorites as he led the Pistons to the championships, but Fred handled the final situation adroitly and sternly.

Zollner conducted a personal investigation of Molinas when the gambling rumour surfaced. When commissioner Maurice Podoloff kicked him out of the league, it shattered part of Zollner's dream to have another championship.

The hiring of Eckman was another dilemma. The announcement stunned the basketball world, rankled the owners, irritated the coaches and mystified the other referees.

The brash Eckman came to town saying he only knew two plays, but with his cheerleading enthusiasm and a well-coached stable of stars, the Z's stormed to the western division championship.

As this is written in 1995, nobody faults Zollner for moving the franchise to Detroit. The Fort Wayne market was simply not large enough to support a major league enterprise.

Zollner remained persistent in Detroit. In typical Zollner fashion, Fred stayed the course and answered the bell every year until he sold the franchise to Bill Davidson in 1974.

His teams never had a winning season in Detroit until the last one, when they finished 52-30 under coach Ray Scott, and then lost to the Chicago Bulls in the first round of the playoffs.

In 1992, when the Fort Wayne Pistons held a reunion, Detroit Piston president Thomas S. Wilson wrote,

"Fred Zollner was a man with a vision. A dreamer with an adventurous spirit who had such a passion for basketball, he would do anything in his power to see that his team, the Ft. Wayne Pistons and the league they played in succeeded.

"I don't think he could have imagined the effect his game would have on the world. I also suspect that he couldn't have imagined that his team, the Ft. Wayne Pistons, would eventually go on, as the Detroit Pistons, to win consecutive NBA titles in 1989 and 1990!

“Roots are what give a tree its foundation. If this is true then Fort Wayne can definitely be called the root of what is the Pistons family tree.”

At the NBA’s Silver Anniversary All-Star game in Phoenix in 1975, Fred Zollner was honored as “Mr. Pro Basketball”. His name was attached to an annual award given to the team with the best record in the western conference.

He served on the board of trustees of the Basketball Hall of Fame.

Fred Zollner served as the mayor of Golden Beach, Florida, and died there in 1982. He never won the championship ring he so wanted. Posthumous induction into the Basketball Hall of Fame would be a great tribute to his unassailable contributions to professional basketball.







Rodger Nelson was born in Columbus, Ohio, attended Ohio State and still 'bleeds Scarlet and Gray' for his beloved Buckeyes.

He began his journalistic career at the age of 13, so he has enjoyed sixty years of writing, editing and promoting sports. This includes stints in Cincinnati, Tucson and Columbus.

He was publicity director and assistant athletic director of the Fort Wayne Zollner Pistons, 1947-1954.

From 1958 to 1983 he was general manager of Allen Dairy Products in Fort Wayne.

A founding member of the Mad Anthony's pro-am golf classic he was named "Mr. Mad Anthony" in 1993.

In 1966 he was presented with the Sagamore of the Wabash award, Indiana's highest civilian honor.

*Zollner Piston logo
re-created by
Bob Parker*

“The Pistons were a major league sports organization playing in a small city. There we were, traveling in Fred Zollner’s airplane, playing the number one cities in the country.

“The players idolized Fred. It was not his money. He did something no one else could have done—playing major league sports in a minor league city. He has not yet been appreciated enough for it.”

- Hilliard Gates, broadcaster

“Fred Zollner brought respectability to professional basketball. By doing so, he did more for the game in the first twenty years than anyone else. Why he is not in the Basketball Hall of Fame is one of the great travesties.”

- George Yardley, player

“We were a group of guys that really didn’t need any management. They knew their position, they could think real well. They could win a game. Fred Zollner used to say we were the best round ball team in the world. Thanks for the memories.”

- Hughie Johnston, player

“They didn’t only play well once in a while. They did it night after night. The fact was, the Pistons were unbelievably good.”

- Don Graham, fan